

A Continuum of Traversing Lines:
Youth Political Participation in *Gaia Online*

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Child and Youth Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Faculty of Social Science, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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Abstract

This qualitative research project uses a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework to address the question: “How are the politically oriented social forums in Gaia Online experienced as a continuum of overlapping of lines, including molar lines, lines of flight, and molecular lines?” Although smooth lines of flight may occur in Gaia, there are always mechanisms that work to re-territorialize them as more striated molar operations. Conversely, while more striated molar lines may be evident in Gaia, there are also smooth lines of flight that attempt to deterritorialize them as smooth space. Founded in 2003, Gaia is a virtual community in which members use 3D avatars to socialize with others, create content, and play games. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have defined space with three systems: on one end is state-oriented static space, on the other end is nomadic fluid space, and situated in the middle is molecular space which contains both smooth and striating elements. While state-oriented striated space is based on routines, rules, and specifications, nomadic smooth space is flexible, always changing, and full of possibility. Some of the smoother operations that are evident in Gaia include becoming *other*, decentred communications, desire as resistance, and lines of flight. Some of the more striated operations include social reproduction of gender norms/expectations, capitalist mechanisms, violence and intolerance linked to categories and binaries (racism/sexism/ageism), the regulation of desire, and the organisation of bodies.

Acknowledgments

This work is owed primarily to my MA supervisory committee, and to my family.

I was fortunate to have worked with a supervisory committee who always pushed me to think more critically about my work. I am especially grateful for my thesis supervisor Rebecca Raby who was always there to meet with me and to help me sort out some of those tricky Deleuzian concepts. Thank you to Hans Skott-Myhre and Dale Bradley, both of whom took the time to offer me their insights and to encourage me to expand my understandings of Deleuze and Guattari's theories. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Gary Genokso from the University of Ontario. I appreciate your insights and the time and energy you invested in your assessment of my thesis as the external examiner.

To my parents, thank you for supporting me as I progressed through my academic journey. I know now that all of those late nights and stressful time crunches were just as hard on you as they were on me. Thank you for always believing that I could get through this even when I didn't believe it myself. Without your support and encouragement this work would not have been possible. I promise now that I am done I will clear all of my books off the dining room table.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Jesse, whose continuous support and belief in my efforts has been sustaining.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Particularly for western nations, new media technologies increasingly play an important role in the everyday lives of young people (Mallan, Singh & Giardina, 2010, p. 255). One media technology gaining popularity among young internet users is online social gaming, also often referred to as social networking sites or virtual communities. Online virtual communities are cyberspaces where people socialize, participate in group activities, and trade virtual property through virtual characters called avatars. Using a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework in this paper, I address the question: “How are the politically oriented social forums in Gaia Online experienced as a continuum of overlapping of lines, including molar lines, lines of flight, and molecular lines?” Although smooth lines of flight may occur in Gaia, there are always mechanisms that work to re-territorialize them as more striated molar operations. Conversely, while more striated molar lines may be evident in Gaia, there are also smooth lines of flight that attempt to deterritorialize them as smooth space.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have defined space with three systems: on one end is state-oriented static space, on the other is nomadic fluid space, and situated in the middle is molecular space which contains both smooth and striating elements. The former state-oriented space is comprised of molar lines that territorialize, regulate, order, and segment bodies and social relations through binary oppositions such as man/woman and adult/child (Colebrook, 2002, p. 189). While this state-oriented striated space is based on routines, rules, and specifications, nomadic smooth space is flexible, always changing, and full of possibility. This smooth nomadic space is made up of lines of flight that “constitute passages away from or even the breaking of” molar lines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 293). Deleuze and Guattari have also referred to a third system of lines called molecular. These lines operate between smooth and striated spaces. While

the molar line is strictly based on rigid striated space and the line of flight is entirely grounded in fluid smooth space, the molecular line contains both smooth and striated elements. Deleuze and Guattari argue "there is a line of flight, which is already complex since it has singularities; and there is a customary or molar line with segments; and between the two, there is a molecular line with quanta that cause it to tip to one side or the other" (p. 203). The distinction between molar lines, lines of flight, and molecular lines does not describe three mutually-exclusive types, rather, the systems of lines overlap and entangle with one another to produce an assemblage (Stivale, 1984). Assemblage refers to the ways in which *physical* bodies and objects interrelate, and how they affect and are affected by one another. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note how every assemblage is made up of three types of lines that are "constantly crossing, intersecting for a moment, following one another" (p. 203). There is no such thing as authentic smooth space or pure striated space. For the purpose of this research paper, I use Deleuze and Guattari's theories on molar lines, lines of flight, and molecular lines to focus on the virtual community Gaia Online. Founded in 2003, Gaia is a virtual community in which members use 3D avatars to socialize with others, create content, and play games. Gaia is a place where teens can create their own space, express their individual style, and participate in forum discussions (Gaia, 2012). Gaia has over seven million registered users; the majority of whom are between the ages of 13 and 24 (Quantcast, 2012).

Although Deleuze and Guattari's theories on the rhizome have been used extensively in relation to the internet, only a few studies have specifically applied their theories to virtual communities (Ringrose, 2011; Nunes, 1999). Furthermore, there have not been any studies that use a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework to look specifically at Gaia Online. Children and youth have considerable insight to offer as young people, rather than as *merely* future adults. As

a result, in this paper I explore the different ways that young people use virtual communities to both resist and reproduce social boundaries and expectations. Currently, most of the research concerning young people and internet use tends to look at the internet as either *strictly* positive or negative. Extensive research has been done on social networking sites as new unregulated spaces for political participation for young people; however, much of this research fails to account for how virtual communities also work to reproduce and regulate ideas about identity. Conversely, there have also been numerous studies documenting the consequences of internet use including violence, the expansion of capitalism, and the digital divide; these studies, however, also fail to display the internet as a space for potential liberation and agency. My research project adds to previous research on youth political participation by examining social networking sites from multiple perspectives (i.e., as smooth, striated, and molecular spaces). The internet and virtual communities have changed how people communicate with one another. Over 80% of people living in North America have access to the internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012). Most of the youth in North America have grown up using the internet and cannot remember a time without it (Dahlgren, 2009, p.150). According to one evaluation, 20 to 30 million people habitually participated in virtual communities in 2006, spending an average of nearly twenty-two hours per week within these worlds (Balkin & Noveck, 2006). The high percentage of people participating in virtual communities makes Gaia a relevant and important area of study. Furthermore, by using Deleuze and Guattari's theory on smooth, striated, and molecular space, I contribute new insights to the study of Gaia Online.

As mentioned earlier, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have defined space with three systems, striated space (molar lines), smooth space (lines of flight), and molecular space. Striated molar space differs from smooth space in that it values a system where "lines and

trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to another" (p. 478).

Within striated molar space, "one closes off a surface and 'allocates' it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks" (p. 481). In other words, an individual gets drawn into a state of being where molar lines such as rules, hierarchies, expectations, and boundaries work to confine or 'territorialise' him/her within the parameters of a specified and fixed identity. While striated molar lines are ever-present in our lives, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, "there is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organisations, the resonance apparatus and the over coding machine" (p. 216). These momentary events of flight, which are often represented through minority groups such as youth and women, can sometimes lead to a change in societal values. Youth and women are themselves lines of flight because they do not and cannot fit within the societal boundaries of the majoritarian (i.e., white adult males). Any bodies' unconscious act or performance that moves beyond the societal boundaries of the majoritarian constitutes a line of flight. Lines of flight are involuntary performances; however, as soon as an act becomes conscious and organised it becomes molecular. Events such as the 1960s youth movement and the feminist movement are examples of molecular lines because they occupy the space between smooth lines of flight and striated molar space. Similarly, ad hoc political movements, cooperatives, communes, subcultures, and undergrounds represent molecular space because they simultaneously flee the institutions of society while still maintaining some level of organisation and order (Moulthrop, 1994, p. 303).

In striated molar space, the trajectory is subordinate to the point but, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have shown, within smooth space "the points are subordinated to the trajectory" (p. 478). In this sense, the route or 'line of flight' is more important than the point of contact. The point of contact is fleeting and instantaneous and serves only as a point of passage and is

less important than the continuing movement or line of flight (Moulthrop, 1994, p. 303; Nunes, 1999). Lines of flight are ‘becomings’, or tiny connections and networks that operate at the minute level and open up time and space for people to be different (Ringrose, 2011, p. 603). Lines of flight can be exciting, disrupting, full of possibility, and at times even dangerous. While there are social forces that work to categorize bodies based on certain criteria, “no set of categories or definitions can fully capture the complex dynamism of creative force in any given action” (Skott-Myhre, 2002, p. 11). There are always acts that escape or do not fit into the rigid categories that attempt to confine them, this “leaves a surplus not bounded by either definition or the act itself” (Skott-Myhre, p. 11). This surplus is what constitutes the line of flight. Lines of flight are not produced by conscious efforts of resistance to authority, but rather by the surplus that escapes control by means other than direct opposition (Linstead & Thanem, p. 1491). While Deleuze and Guattari tend to speak about lines of flight as more positive events, it is important to note that lines of flight can also have the potential to be destructive when, for example, they do not intersect with molar and molecular lines. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), lines of flight operate within smooth space and resemble a nomadic system of movement (p.410). For nomads, there are no beginnings or endings, only multiple trajectories or lines of flight for travelling through life (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 360). These trajectories proceed from the middle, through the middle, and come and go, rather than start and finish (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). Thus, the nomadic figure is constantly experiencing lines of flight and, therefore, always in a state of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’ Always ‘becoming’ implies that no one can ever ‘become.’ Therefore, within smooth space, identities are fluid and continuously changing, rather than fixed and stable (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977, pp. 34-35).

Within events or acts of becoming, “deterritorialized lines of flight might appear” (Skott-Myhre, 2008, p. 21). Deterritorialisation occurs when we free ourselves from the restrictions and boundaries of controlled, striated space, when “energy momentarily moves outside normative strata” (Ringrose, 2011, p. 603). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), deterritorialized becoming does not occur in isolation, it is the capacity for bodies to affect and be affected (p. 239). This capacity is what constitutes an assemblage where bodies can only function as they connect with other bodies in a constant process of becoming (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 366). In a Deleuzian sense, bodies do not necessarily refer to human bodies, but rather to a multiple series of connections that assemble as a particular spatial and temporal movement (Coleman, 2011, p. 168). Affect only exists in a multiplicity, that is, in relation to other bodies. A multiplicity is not defined by singular elements, or by a “center of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the number of dimensions it has; it is not divisible, it cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 249). A multiplicity inevitably always gains and loses dimensions, thus constantly changing its nature and always becoming. Each time the multiplicity is changed a new assemblage is formed with a new set of relations, experiences, and new possibilities for becoming (Coleman, 2011, p. 168).

Becoming involves experimenting with multiplicities or multiple subjectivities; it is always a becoming *other* (other than the norm or ideal scribed in molar binaries) (Colebrook, 2002, p. 191). Becoming *other* “begins by differentiating one molecular body from two molar categories” (i.e., man/woman) (Massumi, 1992, p.102). This differentiation creates a volatile situation in which bodies occupy smooth space, moving in all directions (p.102). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), becoming *other* constitutes the minoritarian. While the opposing majoritarian model is defined by authoritative molar structures that work to fix the “self” in time

and place, “a minority, on the other hand, has no model, it’s a becoming, a process” (p. 173). As noted by Deleuze and Guattari, the majoritarian is an ideal that is neither achievable nor particularly desirable. Therefore, the majority is nobody because everybody is “caught, one way or another, in a minority becoming that would lead them into unknown paths if they opted to follow it through” (p. 173). The possibilities for becoming can be extended and limited through particular relations between bodies and assemblages. Becomings occur in smooth space; however, as Deleuze and Guattari state at the end of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us” (p. 500), precisely because there is nothing to be saved from. We are made up of three lines that come together to create an assemblage with each type of line serving a purpose, as well as posing a risk. As soon as a smooth line of flight becomes the ideal by which we live our lives it becomes reterritorialised into striated molar space and a new line of flight will appear. As an ideal, smooth space can never be achieved because it is constantly changing.

For Deleuze and Guattari, smooth, striated, and molecular spaces differ fundamentally in nature; however, the three spaces can only exist in mixture. These spaces are not univocal, but rather should be considered as overlapping and entangled. Individuals continuously move between the spaces, and, at times, occupy all three. While we are constantly being deterritorialized from striated spaces by lines of flight, we are also ceaselessly being reterritorialized within new regimes of striated space (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 360; Buchanan, 2007, p. 13). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) state, “you may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet” eventually you will “reencounter organisations that re-stratify everything, formulations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject” (p. 9). Molar, molecular, and lines of flight all serve a purpose in the life of an assemblage. Every assemblage unavoidably

contains both reterritorializing elements, which favour stabilization and structure, as well as “cutting edges of deterritorialisations which carry it away” (p. 90). Although there are instances where bodies do in fact desire codified forms, there are also deterritorialized lines of flight that are the product of the bodies’ desire to resist being coded, categorised, and fixed in space and time by molar structures.

According to Negri & Hardt (2009), there are various levels of power that currently operate within society: the power of disciplinary regimes, the power of life as resistance striving towards an alternative existence, and the power that falls between (p. 57). In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, one is the power of striated space, the other is the power of smooth space, and the latter the power of molecular space. Within smooth space, the self “is produced by the desire of life to express itself radically and uniquely,” while within striated space “mechanisms of control and domination attempt to turn those productions to other purposes” (Skott-Myhre, 2008, p. 176). While bodies desire to be a part of reassuring modes of organisation, they also simultaneously repel them (Malins, 2004, p. 87). Because identity is fluid and inconsistent, no one can ever fit into a single stable identity category. The movements that occur outside of or between these social categories is where desire flows in different directions and produces new possibilities and potentials (p. 88). These momentary lines of movement or flight moving away from organisation and striated space bring an individual closer to becoming *other*. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not simply a personal fantasy but rather a reality that not only defies any social determination, but also shapes the social in many ways (Zembylas, 2007, p. 335). Through desire, “individuals overcome repressive subjectivities to become desiring ‘nomads’ in a constant process of becoming and transformation” (p. 336). For Deleuze (1992), desire can take on many forms that can lead to numerous outcomes, both positive and negative. A body can desire to be

codified and controlled, it can desire to hate and cause harm, but it can also desire to resist oppressive forces (p. 19). All bodies desire to form connections with other bodies. Through these connections or ‘desiring assemblages’, desire flows and bodies are momentarily able to transform themselves and to produce new social formations (Malins, 2004, p. 89). This research paper closely examines the Deleuzo- Guattarian concepts defined above including smooth and striated space, lines of flight, molecular lines, and molar lines, as well as becoming *other* and desire in relation to the virtual world Gaia online.

Chapter two of this research paper outlines the literature in the field as it relates to youth political activism and new media technologies. Discussed are Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of becoming-child in relation to the new sociology of childhood and postmodernist thought. This chapter also outlines some of the current literature that views new technologies as inherently liberating tools. In contrast to this view, some of the literature that views technology as oppressive and dangerous is also examined. Lastly, this chapter also discusses some of the literature that employs a Deleuzo -Guattarian theoretical framework to look at youth subcultures.

Chapter three outlines my research methodology. Firstly I define what I mean by ‘political’ and how this definition influenced my methodological choices. This chapter also discusses how I chose my participants for the research study as well as some setbacks that I encountered during the research process. Also offered in this chapter are my justifications for choosing asynchronous focus groups and observation as my research methods. Lastly, this chapter outlines some of the limitations of my research as well as some of the ethical concerns that should be taken into consideration when doing online research with young people.

Chapter four contains the discussion and analysis portion of this research project. This chapter begins by examining the internet’s potential for aiding in the formation of rhizomatic

relations. Next, it suggests that molar mechanisms such as racism and sexism which exist in the offline world also exist in Gaia; in this sense it argues that the virtual is the real. Also looked at are the various ways in which Gaia is made up of a continuum of overlapping lines; this entanglement can be seen particularly in the enforcement of Gaian rules, regulations, and guidelines. Also reviewed are the aspects of access and sustainability within the Gaian guild forums and how these relate to molar and molecular lines. Furthermore, this section examines a Gaian guild called *The Truth Seekers Guild* as a desiring assemblage that contains events of molecular resistance. Lastly, this chapter looks closely at the possibility of Gaia as a space for potential lines of flight and becoming *other*.

Chapter five concludes this research project by summarising the theoretical framework and research findings. Furthermore, it hashes out some potential implications of this research as well as some limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to evaluate current research relevant to young people and technology as it relates to Deleuze and Guattari's theories of smooth and striated spaces. There are several emerging themes that relate to my discussion of Gaia as a continuum of traversing lines. The first section of this literature review focuses on examining the literature that indirectly relates to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of smooth space. Initially, various studies that are concerned with 'the new sociology of childhood' are examined. These studies are important to this research project in that they create an academic space where young people can potentially escape the striated confines of age-related specifications. This research relates to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming,' an event that occurs in smooth space. This section also discusses postmodernist research as it relates to the fluidity of identity in virtual communities. As well, it examines literature arguing these communities can operate as spaces for the production of subversive identities and multiple subject positions, that is in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, as smooth spaces for new political subjectivities. The following section examines the research that deals directly with virtual communities. While these studies do not directly utilize a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework, they do relate to my use of the terms smoother and more striated spaces by suggesting that virtual communities can serve as both potentially liberating as well as oppressing spaces. The third section is concerned with examining the literature that indirectly relates to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of striated space. One of the dominant themes that is discussed in this section includes the idea of technology as detrimental to children's development and presumed innocence. Also literature is explored that discusses striating rules and regulations in cyberspace, the commodification of online worlds, the hierarchy of virtual access, and the reproduction of striated operations in the virtual world. The last section of this

review discusses literature that directly uses a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework to consider youth subcultures.

‘Becoming-Child’ and the New Sociology of Childhood

A significant component of Deleuze and Guattari’s work is the idea of ‘becoming.’ Becoming is an event where the self produces itself beyond the scope of its own previous lineal manifestation (Skott-Myhre, 2008, p. 23). While Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of becoming is not often used in research with children and youth other studies have similarly challenged more molar conceptualizations of childhood. In 1960, French historian Philip Aries argued that the ‘child’ was a contemporary concept of modern society and that a distinct concept of childhood as a separate stage of life did not exist in medieval and early modern Europe (Stearns, 2008, p. 43). Although Aries work was widely received as ground-breaking and innovative, it was not without criticism. Archard (1993) was one of several critics to suggest that Aries work was riddled with “presentism” in that he tried to interpret the past through the lens of present day values and assumptions (p. 23; Wilson, 1980). Although Aries’ work may have been flawed in some aspects of his research and methodology, his work is still revolutionary in that it laid the ground-work for studying childhood as a striated social construct. The social constructionist view of childhood suggests childhood is not a universal or fixed concept, but rather one that varies across time, place, and culture (Brocklehurst, 2006; Heywood, 2001). Brocklehurst (2006) argues, ‘childhood’ is a concept that can be made and unmade as befitting to the dominant interests of society (p. 2). James and James (2004) have similarly argued that the contingent nature of ‘childhood’ is evident in the varying definitions of the concept seen throughout the world. These diverse definitions are not so much determined by the physical or biological qualities associated

with childhood as they are governed by the social, religious, and cultural or legal devices by which societies recognize the transition from childhood to adulthood (Brocklehurst, 2006, p. 7).

Although social constructionist theories on children and childhood are slowly gaining academic recognition, developmental theories that value striation still tend to dominate the field. Within the area of developmental psychology, there are two general theories that ground discussions about children and youth. One developmental theory views children as incomplete human beings and, therefore, less than or inferior to adults, while the other sees children as having essential ‘child-like’ qualities that distinguish them from adults (Brocklehurst, 2006, pp. 3-4). The former perspective emphasises stage-based development and is adopted by many of the leading developmental theorists in the field, including Freud (1905), Piaget (1932), Erikson (1950), and Vygotsky (1978). These theorists share a view of childhood as consisting of stages requiring accomplishment before the ultimate goal of adulthood can be reached. The latter theory, which suggests that children hold innate ‘child-like’ qualities, places emphasis on the innocent nature of childhood and the corruptibility of society (Grossberg, 2005). These developmental theories view children as vulnerable, irresponsible, immature, and inferior to adults, and have thus been critiqued for denying that young people have any agency over their own lives (Grossberg, 2005; Holland, 2005; Kitzenger, 1997). These developmental discourses that claim the position of ‘modern science’ are based on hegemonic knowledge frameworks that assume the position of ‘unquestionable truth’ (Kennedy, 2006, p. 2; Gittins, 2004; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). These ‘unquestionable truths’ based on ‘objective science’ are in fact derived from highly subjective philosophical constructions of childhood.

More recently, scholars in the fields of humanities and social studies have begun to question developmental discourses about childhood that objectify children in favour of a new

study of childhood (Kennedy, 2006). This ‘new sociology of childhood’ supports the position that “children’s relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right” and “children should be seen as active social agents” (Kehily, 2004, p. 8; Walkerdine, 2004; James & Prout, 1997). Jenks (2004) similarly has argued that a new paradigm in the sociology of childhood has emerged that advocates for the notion of childhood as a social construct, sees children and childhoods as not universal, and acknowledges that children are worthy of study in their own right. Wyness’s (2006) work with children’s cultures supports this theory by demonstrating how “children establish themselves as social actors through on-going interaction with others” (p. 166). For Wyness, children are a significant part of the social world, rather than members-in-the-making and, therefore, should be viewed as important contributors to society (p. 166). What is most significant about the ‘new sociology of childhood’ is children are not simply seen as passive voyeurs of society and culture, but rather as active contributors to cultural production through innovation and interaction. Thus, Wyness argues, “children are not simply being prepared for a later real world, they actively help to sustain, reproduce and create society as children” (p. 168). Maira (2005) has similarly argued that current childhood studies should “pay attention to young people’s own understandings of politics and the ways they negotiate relationships of power in different realms of their everyday lives” (p. 107; see also Alderson, 2000; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Raby, 2007; Chin, 2001). The recognition of childhood as a social construct relates to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theory of ‘becoming’ because from this perspective childhood is not seen as a separate space from adulthood; a subject never becomes adult nor stays young (Skott-Myhre, 2008, p. 8). In Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of becoming, ‘child’ is one of the multiple subjectivities that an individual may experience in his/her lifetime.

In this sense, childhood is a momentary event rather than a developmental stage or platform (p.8).

Colebrook (2003) draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to argue there is no such thing as a “universal child, a child defined from the outside, nor a child formed out of the juridical manifestations of the law” (p. 189). What exists instead is “child” as immanent becoming; child as the “minoritarian” which we all become. At some point, or at multiple points, in our lives we are all becoming child. The complexity of becoming cannot accurately be described or bounded within molar conceptions such as adult/child. Becoming child is a refusal of molar conceptions of identity (Colebrook, p. 197). Skott- Myhre (2005) similarly argues youth is not a fixed social category but, rather, a kind of movement or action in relation to other bodies that has the capacity to affect and be affected. There are mechanisms that attempt to capture aspects of youth and categorise them into particular age ranges or sets of biological criterion; however “no set of categories or definitions can fully capture the complex dynamism of creative force in any given action... the language of description falls short every time” (p. 11). This gap in the language results in a surplus of movements that do not fit within molarized definitions of the self. This surplus is where lines of flight occur (p. 11). Social constructionist research that lends to the idea of ‘becoming’ generates a space to question the concept of child as a static stage and break down the striating mechanisms that work to narrowly define children and youth. In virtual communities, young people can potentially escape the striated confines of age-related specifications by experimenting with postmodern multiplicities.

Becoming Child and Postmodernist Lines of Flight

Some scholars for the new sociology of childhood are influenced by postmodern thinking that values diversity and attempts to create opportunities for multiple voices to participate in the

construction of knowledge. While Deleuze and Guattari do not locate themselves as postmodernists, “they are exemplary representatives of postmodern positions in their thoroughgoing efforts to dismantle modern beliefs in unity, hierarchy, identity, foundations, subjectivity and representation” (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 76). Postmodern theories about children and youth embrace the idea of ‘becoming’ by suggesting all humans are in a constant state of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ is an unachievable and undesirable state. Postmodernism has infiltrated public discourse in many important and influential ways. According to McRobbie (1994), postmodernism has allowed sociological issues that were once considered irrelevant to appear on the intellectual agenda by creating opportunities for many voices to be a part of the construction of knowledge (p. 14). Postmodernism and cultural studies have added new questions to sociological studies of youth culture, for instance by attempting to deconstruct the child/adult binary. Of equal significance, Smith (1992) suggests that postmodernism values the plurality of the different over the duality of opposing binaries (p. 505). Postmodernism dismisses universal binaries such as child/adult by valuing all voices in their own right. These postmodern perspectives have created an academic space where youth, technology, and virtual communities are important and respected areas of research.

Postmodern research concerned with the internet and virtual communities tends to focus on the idea of identity as fluid, mobile, and always in process (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2007). The fluid nature of identity enables online virtual worlds to operate as spaces for the production of subversive identities and multiple subject positions (Ellison, 1999; Smith, 1992). This theory relates to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming *other*, where the goal of the individual is to experiment with as many subjectivities as possible. By experimenting with subjectivities, one can possibly transcend his or her previous *a priori* traits, habits, and

movements and begin to access potential traits, habits, and movements (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 151). There are numerous scholars who believe young people have the potential to play a more active role in society; however, this potential is hindered by restrictions placed on them. Many of these scholars have done research to look at how children and youth resist dominant assumptions, indicating they are apolitical through becoming increasingly skilled at navigating cyberspace (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Harris, 2000). Increasingly in western nations young people are using digital technologies to participate in political matters (NYARS). Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) have argued the internet is a postmodern space where the adult/child dichotomy is no longer inviolable. For many children, the internet is a space where they are the experts and parents are not. This role reversal “may enable children to enter the public domain as knowledgeable computer users”, rather than simply passive dupes of technology (p. 150). Similarly, Richman (2007) has suggested that computer-mediated communication is used by young people in quite sophisticated ways that have the potential to renegotiate the binary boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Dahlgren & Olsson (2007) have argued that the “internet serves as a resource for alternative identities” (p.69). Thus, the internet and online social networking universes operate as spaces that open up possibilities for people to occupy new subject positions they are unable to inhabit within their physical bodies (Cumberland, 2004). The notion of multiple subject positions and fluid identities correlates well coherent with a Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy that values anti-essentialist discourses.

Many believe postmodernism has been beneficial because of its philosophic challenge of metanarratives and privileged truths governing how people live (Samuels, 2008, p. 219). Through challenging the status quo, postmodernism makes space for “those whose voices were historically drowned out by modernist metanarratives of mastery, which were both patriarchal

and imperialist” (McRobbie, 1994, p. 15). Some modernist theories, particularly in the field of psychology, assume young people are politically apathetic and incapable of contributing to society (Smith et al., 2005). However, with the emergence of postmodern perspectives, young people are given the chance to break free of modernist ‘truths’ concerning what they *can* and *cannot* do. In this sense, postmodernism has “enfranchised a new body of intellectuals,” people who can now speak from positions of difference in terms of class, gender, sexuality, and age (Storey, 1993, p. 161). Crowe & Bradford (2006) argue young people are increasingly choosing to ‘speak’ from the space of online virtual worlds. Through everyday interactions in online virtual worlds, young people have the capacity to produce lines of flight from adult assumptions and expectations.

For many postmodern scholars, the internet and virtual communities have become new spaces for political participation and civic engagement among young people, or, in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, smooth spaces for new political subjectivities. Mallan et al. (2010) advocate for new media technologies as an important part of young people’s lives both in and away from school (p. 255). Doering (2008) also argues that new media technologies are important in giving young people the means to create and engage in innovative and artistic forms of civic engagement (p. 6). While conducting research within the online virtual world, *Runescape*, Crowe and Bradford (2006) concluded the youth participants in their study experienced the virtual place as a space for young people to engage in new ways of communicating and participating in society (p. 330). Similarly, in their study of the video-sharing website *Youtube*, Burgess and Green (2009) have argued young people are increasingly using online activities to engage in meaningful political work. Davies (2009) has suggested online social gaming universes provide space for youth to participate in political matters and destabilize their position as a socially

marginalized group (p. 169). Likewise, Crowe and Bradford (2006) argue young people are using social gaming sites to transcend age boundaries, which have traditionally positioned them as holding an apathetic stance towards political life.

Molecular Lines in the Virtual Sphere

Other research has taken a more neutral stance towards virtual communities by suggesting they have changed how we live, yet this change should not be perceived as only bad or good. These studies adhere more cohesively than the former studies with the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy of territorialisation, deterritorialisation, and reterritorialisation. From this perspective, virtual communities have the potential to operate as smooth spaces, as well as striated spaces, rather than being strictly delimited to one or the other. The overarching argument of much of this research focuses on how virtual communities have begun to blur the lines between the public and private spheres in contemporary society (Samuels, 2008; Turkle, 1995). The result of this distortion of spaces has been the merging of online and offline identities in a situation where the internet can no longer be separated from everyday life. Samuels (2008) writes a theoretical analysis of the current literature to suggest that postmodern theory is no longer relevant when looking at young people's engagement with technology. He introduces the term *auto-modernity*, as the new perspective from which research should be conducted. From an auto-modern perspective, people should not be seen as separate from technology. No longer is it human against the machine, rather, humans are combining with technology "into a single circuit of interactivity" (p. 219). Davies (2009) also argues that technology has become normalized in western society to the degree that it is "a fact of life, a way of being in the world" (168). Because participating in virtual communities is an act of everyday life, in doing so people blend on- and offline lives. Online and offline activities work simultaneously with one another to shape, define,

and redefine the lives and identities of young people within and outside of cyberspace in both liberating and oppressing ways.

Bogost (2011) has argued that technology should not be looked at as positive or negative, but rather perceived as a neutral phenomenon that influences how we interact with our world (p. 2). According to Bogost, technology is an assemblage capable of affecting people in both remarkable and unremarkable ways. The internet, for example, can be used for creative purposes, but it can also be used to perform mundane tasks such as paying bills (p. 3). Like the internet, videogames are a medium with a variety of valid uses across a spectrum from unique to ordinary. Because of their infinite uses, videogames should no longer be perceived as a subcultural form meant for adolescents, but rather should be looked at as “just another medium woven into everyday life” (Bogost, p. 7). Similarly, Hillis (2009) has argued that with the emergence of role playing games and avatars, the abstract and the real are no longer binaries. Although avatar creations are representations of real people, the participants who engage in this type of gaming do not necessarily perceive them as not real (p. 14). Hillis argues these environments are now being “experienced as actual spaces in which aspects of actual human beings have come to reside” (p. 14). While other scholars have suggested that game spaces are not the same as real life spaces and therefore void of real life issues, Hillis suggests that because game spaces are perceived by the players as real life spaces, the liberating as well as oppressive mechanisms that operate in the offline world are carried over into the virtual sphere. According to Hillis, this development far exceeds the powers of postmodern simulation in that it depicts the “evolution of the machine world of images as an abstract sovereign post representational force into which...aspects of human beings can (re) locate” (p. 14). Thomas & Brown (2009) have similarly suggested that when people participate in online gaming, they are neither situated in

only the game or only the world, rather, they co-exist in both. For Turkle (1995), “we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code” (21). Balsamo (2011) has similarly argued that technology and culture are inseparable. Cyberspace has the potential to operate as a smoother space in which an individual can transcend societal boundaries; however, because the virtual world mirrors the real world in many ways, striated operations that occur in the offline world also occur in the virtual.

Striating Mechanisms in the Virtual Sphere

While the scholars mentioned above view the internet and social gaming as positive or neutral spaces, there are many others who are skeptical of the changes technology brings. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, these studies tend to view new technologies as striating and dangerous spaces. Media theorist Neil Postman is well known for his critique of new technology and its impact on human values. Postman (1982) was skeptical about the benefits of technology arguing that rather than promoting individualism and complex thought, computers will be used for economic and political interests to control the masses (p. 149). Koch (2012) has similarly argued that, “virtual liberation masks the continued expansion of the instruments of oppression” (p. 163). For Koch, computers and the internet are just one more medium where dominant groups are organising and maintaining control of the masses (p. 164). The internet also has detrimental effects on a person’s capacity for political action in how it dilutes his or her commitment to real political space; a “real” space that requires “real bodies” (p. 164). As argued by Koch, individuals need to learn how to be political within the confines of real space and their real bodies which are tied to physical attributes of age, race, class, and gender, rather than living with the false illusion of being able to transcend these boundaries (p. 172). McLaine (2003) has also

argued that the internet can only be used as a tool to avoid issues of ageism, racism, and sexism, rather than helping people to acknowledge and overcome these barriers (p. 235).

Other critical perspectives of technology tend to take a more striated approach to looking at new media technologies by focusing on the detrimental effects they can have on children's development and innocence. These perspectives emerge in reaction to the underground culture of young people and focus on parent and educator-led demands for "the sheltered child" (Cross, 2004, p. 50). This adult-based need to protect children from the evils of technology and media has led to "moral panics" that are "often irrational and authoritarian, reflecting wider cultural and social insecurities", which are projected onto the young (p. 57). Computer-related moral panics derive from a sense of anxiety felt by many adults who dislike the idea of children becoming more technologically advanced than them. This anxiety often incites parents to gain more control over children's internet use and, thus, dominate their children's desire for autonomy in the virtual sphere, and create striating regulations. These attitudes are seen throughout North America in the headlines of major newspapers. For example, a recent *Toronto Star* article by Findlay (2012) laments the internet and its threat to childhood innocence by arguing the web gives sexual offenders access to a larger potential pool of young victims. These attitudes are mirrored within academic literature. A common criticism of video games is they increase the violent tendencies among youth (Gentile & Anderson, 2006; Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Liao et al. (2005) have argued that high internet use among troubled youth often lead to risky and sometimes violent relationships. Wolak et al. (2003) have also argued that online relationships have the potential for encouraging racism, fascination with violence, and antisocial attitudes among at-risk youth. Calvert (2008) has suggested that the marketing strategies used on the internet make children and youth vulnerable "because they lack the cognitive skills to understand the persuasive intent" of

the advertisements (p. 205). The Media Awareness Network (2000) outlines several risks associated with children's internet uses, including "exposure to material considered to be obscene, pornographic, violent, hate-filled, racist, or generally offensive; contact with individuals who may jeopardize the safety of children or other family members; harassment; and exploitation by online marketers" (p. 6). McLaine's (2003) work also touches on the potential for the commodification of online communities (p. 233). Most online communities require new registrants to fill out an extensive questionnaire regarding age, gender, race, date of birth, location, relationship status, tastes, and hobbies. Their responses are then sold to third party organisations and used as marketing information (p.241). McLaine argues this underhanded strategy of selling personal information is not only exploitive, but it also diminishes online communities' potential for empowering its members. The media-instigated demand for adult control and supervision in youth online activities, as well as the commodification of online communities, can operate as striated mechanisms in virtual communities. While the critical analyses mentioned above focus on the dangers of contact, content, and commercialism, other critics tend to concentrate on the risks of exclusion and the digital divide.

Considerable research about the internet is focused on the benefits for the 'haves' and the disadvantages for the 'have-nots' in the electronic information age. Based on this dichotomy, it could be argued that the internet acts as a striated space with a hierarchy of access. Mossberger et al. (2003) suggest that the "digital divide" among virtual world participants is attributed to the "patterns of unequal access to information technology based on income, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and geography" (p. 1). The internet has the potential to increase political participation among citizens; however, there is a significant gap in how people of various social positions engage with technology (p. 86; Rice, 2002). While some groups may be reaping the benefits of a

technologically advanced society, those who do not have the social or economic capital for access are left behind and further marginalised (Rice, 2002). For Western nations in particular, individuals who do not have access to computers growing up will on average make less money than their technologically adept counterparts (Flew, 2002, p.88). Computer literacy is increasingly becoming a requirement for economic, social, and cultural capital (p.89). There have been numerous papers written on the digital divide. Equally important are the studies that look at the internet and virtual communities as spaces for the reproduction of striated operations, such as social values and gender stereotypes.

Among internet advocates, cyberspace is often heralded as a space for marginalised groups to resist oppressive identity categories; however, this resistance may be an illusion, thus making these spaces more striated than originally conceived. Papacharissi (2009) has argued that while many scholars offer a utopian perspective on the internet and virtual communities, the striated models often adopted by these spaces limit the opportunities for spontaneous interaction and resistance. In her study of the social networking universe *SmallWorld*, Papacharissi found that the site “employed rigid models of access by enforcing exclusive membership criteria...restricted developer media interaction... [and] threats of removal” (p. 213). Furthermore Papacharissi argued that although clothing and thematic background choices offered by the site give the illusion of free choice and individuality, virtual communities inevitably adopt a specific taste ethos that is transferred to the participants by presenting a carefully compiled selection of interests (p. 213). In turn, these choices limit the member’s capacities for customizing their characters and spaces and ultimately end up forcing people’s decisions through these limited options. When members do attempt to break free of the rigid confines of the game space they are penalized for not following the suggested behavioural norms as set out and

maintained by the developers of the site (Papacharissi, p. 214). A study by Bachen et al. (2008) concluded that most chat rooms, message boards, and online games offered a passive experience to youth, rather than an interactive one, because most features of the sites are created, maintained, and regulated by adults (p. 304). Kenall (2002) found the rigidity of online environments is particularly apparent in how gender and appropriate gender behaviour are defined through clothing choice and participant interactions (p. 103). Kenall notes, “gender enactments of all participants, regardless of online or offline gender designations, tend to conform to standard cultural expectations of masculine and feminine behaviour” (p. 105). The clothing choices offered by the sites often reinforced these gender norms by providing options that conform to hegemonic ideals of femininity and masculinity. Flew (2005) suggested that in most cases representations of gender in digital games are stereotypes. In many games, females are portrayed as sexualized visual objects who wait for male rescue and need to be protected, whereas men are constructed as powerful and superior. These studies focus on the capacity for virtual spaces to reproduce and reinforce social expectations and, therefore, operate as striated spaces. Although none of the previously mentioned studies have overtly adopted a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework of analysis, other studies have employed their theories to look at youth spaces as sites for both reproduction and disruption.

Deleuze and Guattari on Youth Subcultures

Youth subcultures are a popular area of research within childhood studies. Although Skott-Myhre (2008) does not specifically look at virtual communities, his work with the youth subcultures of punks and skin-heads is a good starting point for understanding Deleuze and Guattari’s theories. Skott-Myhre adopts a Deleuzio-Guattarian theoretical framework for developing his pedagogy of radical youth work. Pivotal to Skott-Myhre’s argument is the idea of

subjectus and subjectum: the subject as subjectus “is defined in terms of its submission to an overarching authorial vision” whereas the subject as “subjectum is defined by its creative ability to define itself” (p.4). Skott-Myhre has argued that “youth” is a performance and series of acts; within these acts youth (the subject) can be produced as subjectum rather than subjectus (p.11). Each act performed by the subject either places him or her within the boundaries of the socially created definitions of youth or helps him or her to transcend these definitions (p.11). For Deleuze and Guattari, each act has the possibility of territorializing, deterritorializing, or reterritorializing the subject and, as a result, “produces new possibilities for exceeding the boundaries of definition prescribed by the limited view of the individual” (p. 11). Within these new possibilities, the binary of child/adult can be broken down to create a new smooth space for mutual self-production and unpractised youth-adult relations. Skott-Myhre’s work is significant as he discusses how striating mechanisms, such as socially constructed ideas about children and youth, attempt to limit an individual’s potential for experiencing new subjectivities; however, by using the example of skin-heads, he also shows how these striating operations can be dismantled by lines of flight and becomings.

In his essays on game design, Galloway (2006) draws on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari to formulate *ad hoc* conceptual algorithms for analysing the aesthetic and political impact of video games as a formal medium (xi). Galloway has argued that “gaming,” which refers to the entire system of video games, can be viewed as a “massive cultural medium involving large numbers of organic and inorganic machines” (p.2). These organic machines (humans) and inorganic machines (computers) work together to create a distinct cultural form that requires a new and unique framework for research and analysis. Within this new cultural form, Galloway argues, children are the most important cultural workers (p.4). When people

participate in gaming, they are not only watching or reading the games, but they are acting and interacting with them (p. 37). Using Deleuze and Guattari's theories, Galloway has suggested the interactions that occur in 'gaming' destabilize modern notions of central bureaucracies and vertical hierarchies in favour of a fluid and unorganised network of autonomous social actors (p. 88). While Galloway is a strong supporter of the digital age, he does recognize that utopian views of computers are naïve in ignoring the social inequalities associated with technology and the widening gap between the rich and the poor (p. 89).

Harper (2009) examines the capacity for play to create political communities and capacities. Harper uses a Deleuze-Guattarian theoretical frame work to suggest, contrary to most critical theorist literature that views play as a false consciousness, some forms of play have the potential to emancipate. Harper uses a personal example of playing the bidding style board game *The Merchants of Amsterdam* to suggest that play has the capacity to be both smooth as well as striating (p. 133). Harper argues, from one perspective, games are inherently striating in that there are often rules governing game play and there is an emphasis on moving from one point to another with the ultimate goal of completion (p. 136). However, from a different perspective game play often requires negotiation and the "smoothing over" of striations (p.135). In the smooth spaces of game play, players can engage in "ludicrous behaviour" and experience becomings by experimenting with alternative identities (for example, becoming a millionaire property tycoon in Monopoly) (p.136). Similar to my research, Harper suggests that game play exists as both smooth and striated space; "it is necessarily transgressive enough to allow and facilitate difference but not so transgressive as to preclude meaningful connection" (p.139).

Ringrose (2011) uses Deleuze and Guattari's concepts to analyse young people's engagement with social networking sites. Ringrose argues online space is heterosexually striated

and that social networking sites “create new intensified gendered and sexualised identities and affective relations between young people” (p.598). Ringrose argues that the body is a ‘machinic assemblage,’ in that it “interacts with and has various capacities to affect other bodies and scales of assemblages” (p. 601). For a machinic assemblage “meaning is dependent on which bodies or machines it forms assemblages with” (p.601). From an ethnographic study on a young girl named Louise, Ringrose concluded that Louise’s performance of sexuality was highly affected by her online peers and adhered to heterosexual norms. She also concluded that online ‘assemblages’ do not necessarily offer possibility for lines of flight from discursive representations of femininity; however, they do offer more flexibility than school ‘assemblages’ (p.614). Ringrose’s study is significant in that it employs a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework to specifically consider gender and social networking sites.

In sum, diverse theorizing addresses conceptualizations of young people and their participation online. While the research I have referred to is not all grounded in Deleuze and Guattari’s theories, a recurring thread addresses the possibilities and limitations of the online world for social reproduction and disruption. There are many studies that view the internet as a new space for political participation among young people, however there are just as many that view it as a new space for potential risk. Although Deleuze and Guattari are not postmodern thinkers *per se*, there are areas of their theories that correlate to social constructionist and postmodern approaches which aims to deconstruct metanarratives in an effort to enable multiple voices to be heard in the construction of knowledge.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

There are numerous activities users can engage in while visiting Gaia. The activity that I looked at for this paper is membership and involvement in social groups and forums. There are over 100,000 groups currently established within the Gaia community (Gaia, 2012); however, for the purposes of my research, I looked primarily at pre-existing social groups formed on the basis of political engagement. While I acknowledge that a Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy does not support the notion of categorization, in order to achieve this research project it was necessary to explain what I mean by ‘political;’ I have attempted to do this in a way that pays homage to the fluidity and flexibility of smooth space. Drawing on the ideas of Burgess et al. (2006), I argue that political engagement can be practiced through everyday life in Gaia, including leisure activities such as chatting and playing games, written critiques of the offline world and the virtual world, and creative productions (i.e., poetry, visual art, making clothing) (p.1; Dahlgren, 2009). According to Deleuze & Guattari (1988), “everything is political” (p. 213), not only how we vote, but also “modes of perception, kinds of actions, ways of moving, life-styles, and semiotic regimes” (p. 227). From this micro-political perspective ‘the political’ (and therefore also acts of political resistance) are not only found in large aggregate bodies (courts, executive branches, voting booths, *etc.*), but also in our local communities and daily interactions. In other words, all actions performed in Gaia can be considered political. However for the purpose of this project I have focused mainly on groups that self-identify as political.

Although the internet may not be the cure all for the ills of democracy, it has opened up new spaces for political communications to occur (Dahlgren, 2009, p.8). While some of the forums in Gaia might take on more traditional political structures such as electoral action, civic action, and political voice; other forums may be less organised and less obviously political. The

latter group includes chatterbox forums and interactions that subtly strive for social change through awareness and discussion. While the former groups are centered on openly discussing current political matters, human/animal rights issues, and political party affairs, these groups also include forums that discuss controversial issues such as abortion, gay marriage, gun control, and other political/social values and ideas.

For the purpose of my research, I looked at the groups within Gaia who self-identity as political and whose activities and conversations loosely fall within the definition of political engagement described above. All of the groups within Gaia are searchable via a tagline created by the group administrator. To find participants for my study, I searched for groups using the tagline “political.” Out of the numerous political -oriented groups present within Gaia, I chose six groups for my research study; *The Round Table*, *The Truth Seekers*, *The Pro-Life Guild*, *The Pro-Choice Guild*, *The Republican Party*, and *The Conservatives of Gaia*. Initially, I intended to begin my research by observing and documenting the current conversations taking place in each group. However, it quickly became apparent that most of these groups were not regularly active and, as a result, I focused most (but not all) of my research on the only active guild, *The Truth Seekers*. I visited the *Truth Seekers* guild several times to track the progress of an ongoing conversation called *The Intentional “Dumbing Down.”* This particular conversation was used as the data for my research. Data from a few of the other groups was also looked at for this project, however, in much less detail. Observation was chosen as a research method because it offers an opportunity to observe and listen to the youth in naturally occurring settings (Mayall, 2000, p. 110). As well, observation allows the researcher to gain an insiders’ view of the forum and understand the intricacies of the interactions that occur (Sobeck, Agius, & Mayers, 2007, p. 25). Along with observation, I also chose to include asynchronous focus groups as part of my

research program. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather data from the youth within a “somewhat normative social context” (Raby, 2010, p. 2). Focus group conversations were conducted in each of the groups listed above by posting six questions upon which members could comment. According to Williams (2012), asynchronous focus groups are different from face-to-face focus groups in that they “normally use online discussion boards or forums and allow participants and researchers to read and reply to each other’s postings at times of their own choosing” (p. 370). Below are the questions that were asked.

- 1) Do you think that Gaia is a space where people can speak about issues they would not necessarily be able to in the offline world? If so, in what ways?
- 2) Do you think that the rules and regulations set out by Gaia influence what you write/talk about in this forum? If so, in what ways?
- 3) What are the types of political issues you feel comfortable talking about in this forum? Are there any political issues that you feel uncomfortable discussing?
- 4) Do you consider this group a political activist group? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- 5) Are you as politically active in the offline world as you are in Gaia? If so, in what ways?
- 6) Do you think that Gaia and/or this forum is an effective way to voice your opinions on political matters and/or bring about societal change? If yes, why? If no, why not?

In order to initiate this portion of my research, I visited the previously mentioned groups and posted a letter of invitation followed by the above questions. My intention for this portion was to generate a variety of participant responses. Participants were also offered the opportunity to contact me individually through email as an alternative to answering questions in the group context. The questions were the same for all six groups.

Unfortunately, a variety of circumstances hindered my ability to complete this portion of my research project. First of all, participant response was very low. After one week, only six people had responded to the questions; two respondents were from *The Republican Party* guild, one was from *The Conservatives* guild, and the remaining three were from *The Truth Seekers* guild. At this point the conversation in which I had started requesting research participants had been pushed down the list and was no longer visible so I posted my letter of invitation followed by the questions again. Shortly after posting the questions for the second time I received an email from Gaia's site moderator Dlin informing me that I was not allowed to conduct research on Gaia and that continuing to do so would result in the termination of my membership. Because of this, I chose not to continue to post my research questions; thus resulting in less data being collected than initially intended. Nevertheless, the few responses that were collected were analysed as data. In an attempt to limit the use of categorisation I did not choose a method of analysis before beginning the coding process. My intention was to adopt a Deleuzian mindset in an effort to read the data without a path or plan of logic and thus allow for new and surprising connections to emerge.

As noted earlier, Deleuze and Guattari's theories stand in opposition to the notions of structure, categorisation, and organisation; all of which can be seen in some aspects of my research methodology. However, as in every assemblage, molar lines of progress are as necessary as molecular lines of flight. That being said, this paper, as an assemblage, is also a continuum of traversing lines. In order to pay homage to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of fluidity as a researcher, I must remain reflexive and aware of the limits of my research. I realise that this project looks at only a mere moment in an ever changing assemblage and that my presence within that assemblage affects it in some way. However, the intention of this project is to get a

glimpse of the complexities of cyber interactions rather than making any definitive truth statements about what does/does not constitute a line of flight/molar/molecular.

An obvious, and well documented, limitation to online research is that within cyberspace there is no certainty about whom you are talking to. The faceless nature of the internet makes it easy for people to speak outside of their own presumed subject positions and, thus, possibly jeopardize the validity of the research. While I acknowledge that people's offline location in terms of social categories such as age, race, and gender will also influence how they are online, I do not think that this risk can be avoided. The rules in Gaia explicitly state a user may not ask another user for personal information; therefore, I had to rely solely on the information freely provided by the participants. Some may argue that a significant limitation of my research is it claims to focus on youth, yet I do not ask the ages of the participants. Thus, there was no way for me to ensure my participants do in fact fit within the North American concept of "youth." However, because the site's demographics indicate that the majority of its participants are between the ages of 13-24, I feel confident most participants fall within this age range.

Another ethical consideration for my research is it involves children. At many times, ethics boards and other 'gatekeepers' limit young people's potential for participating in meaningful research. However, I realise that because the developmental model of children as vulnerable and innocent still dominates popular discourse about childhood, I have to address 'being a child' as an ethical consideration. Some participants were likely minors; however, I requested that the parental consent requirement be waived because with this type of online research it is not feasible to obtain parental consent. It may have been insulting to the young participants if I required them to obtain parental consent before participating. For many of the young people on Gaia, it is a personal space where they are the authority, and it could possibly

be perceived as a lack of respect if I asked for parental consent. The purpose of my study was to hear the ‘voice’ of youth unfiltered through an adult ‘gatekeeper.’ Therefore, it would have been detrimental to my study if I were required to obtain parental consent. Also, the questions that were posted on the forums were not of a sensitive nature and did not address issues beyond the scope of regular conversation. Initially, it was my intention to obtain participant consent before beginning any research. However, the Brock ethics board informed me that because my research was online and publically accessible, participant consent was not required.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In the following chapter, I discuss and analyse the data collected for this research project. The following themes are addressed; molar mechanisms in Gaia, Gaian rules, regulations, and guidelines as a continuum of overlapping lines, access and sustainability within the Gaian guild, the Gaian guild as a desiring assemblage, molecular resistance, lines of flight, becoming *other*, and becoming child.

Codified Rules of Operation and Rhizomatic Relations

A significant component of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) philosophy revolves around the rhizome which resembles a "subterranean stem" that consists of chaotically distributed networks, rather than a hierarchy of trunks and branches (p.5; Moulthrop, 1994, p. 301). The rhizomatic structure has infinitely possible interconnections; it is endless, beginningless, and boundless (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 5). Based on this definition of the rhizome, it has been argued that new digital technologies represent rhizomatic structures in that they offer limitless unmediated possibilities (Burnett, 1993; Landow, 1997). Furthermore, like the rhizome, computer networks have no center of signification and no border-lines. However, more recent research has suggested that in terms of mechanical function, computers are not in fact rhizomatic structures (Conley, 2009).

The ever-bifurcating paths that are inherent in computer mediated technologies stand in opposition to Deleuze and Guattari's model of the rhizome as a weaving of roots rather than a vertical arboreal structure. Perhaps in terms of structure and mechanics, computer networks cannot be equated with the rhizomatic structure; however, one could argue that computers and the internet help in the formation of rhizomatic molecular communications and immanent relations.

When doing research with virtual communities, it is easy to forget that these virtual hubs are not in fact ‘spaces’ but rather a complicated interplay of hardware, computer networks, and data transfers. While the end result of a ‘virtual community’ is often perceived as a ‘space’ by its users (Turkle, 1995), the images we see are created by very specific, codified rules of operations (Galloway, 2006, p. 5). These aspects are arguably the definition of molarity with their fixed pathways and predetermined roles. On speaking of computer mediated technologies, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) often compared them to arborescent systems. They have suggested that these systems are hierarchical “with centers of signification and subjectification... [that] only receive a subjective affection along pre-established pathways ... this is evident in current problems in information science and computer science, which still cling to the oldest modes of thought in that they grant all power to a memory or central organ” (p. 16). As a password protected virtual community, Gaia assumes organisation, control, boundaries, and, therefore, more striated space. Despite being online, Gaia is a defined space where people gather which “simulates space by asking users to interact with each other within explicit references to architectural entrances and exits as well as cartological ‘ways’” (Nunes, 1999, n.p.). In this sense, Gaia does not adhere to the notion of smooth space which values multiple entry and exit points. The goal of the virtual world is not to create nomadic flow, but rather to create a stable and inhabitable world. As in any community, randomness and disorganisation “are not particularly valuable per se. Some principles of regulation and constraint are essential” (Moulthrop, 1994, p. 308). For a space to be truly smooth, it would have to be free from all forms of productivity, an ideal that is neither achievable nor desirable. Although the internet itself is inherently molar in that it is based on fixed pathways of productivity it can have rhizomatic potential in terms of how someone engages with it.

There is no guarantee that new technologies will automatically stimulate discussion, social change, and material and political transformation (Macgregor Wise, 2005, p. 124). However, the digital does have the potential to assist in the expression of another possible community and “to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 17). In *Empire* (2000), Hardt and Negri ask: “how can sense and meaning be oriented differently or organized in alternative, coherent communicative apparatuses?” The answer to this question has multiple responses; however, new meanings and lines of flight can be produced through the formation of alternative molecular modes of communication, new relations, and novel ways of interacting with the world. Gaia is part of an enormous online community that has transformed how we interact and socialize with other human beings. The new modes of communication offered by Gaia, such as instant messaging and virtual interactions, can lead to new political forms and networks of power relations, rhizomatic structures, and new desiring assemblages (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 178). These desiring assemblages often contain decentered communications that resist institutional control by imagining and creating an alternative world and disrupting the social assumptions and culture of the offline world. Gaia offers alternative modes to traditional offline (face-face) communication, yet similar to the offline world, Gaia can also be experienced as a continuum of overlapping lines, including molar lines, lines of flight, and molecular lines.

Molar Mechanisms: The Virtual is the Real

Because the virtual world is reflective of the offline world, it cannot escape some of the striated social relations that operate within real life. As a result, some of the striating mechanisms that operate in the offline world are also evident in Gaia. Some of these mechanisms include more obvious molar structures like, cultural hierarchies, unequal privileges, gender stereotypes,

discrimination, and intolerance, as well as more benign molar mechanisms such as the categorization and organisation of bodies. All of these molar structures attempt to reproduce and regulate ideas about identity (Shaviro, 1995). In recent history, there have been numerous arguments in favour of ‘the virtual’ harbouring a new frontier for the unified global community (Barlow, 1996); thus opening up new possibilities for more diverse assemblages. However, at least with regard to *Gaia*, this may not be the case. While Gaia’s online nature does make it globally accessible, it is evident that it has a hegemonic regional culture, and thereby, a fixed cultural identity. Gaia is an American company, 85% of users are based in the United States (Au, 2007), and most politically oriented conversations and guilds are geared toward American politics and issues. Furthermore, despite the perceived ‘global’ accessibility of Gaia, there is still a significant proportion of the population who are not regular Gaia users. This ‘digital divide’ among Gaia users can be attributed to unequal access to information technology based on income, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and geography (Mossberger et al., “Inequality,” 2003, p. 86). In the case of Gaia, the most dominant group of users are young Americans who are the most powerful and overall determiners of the structure of the virtual world. That being said, although Gaia is universally accessible via the internet, it is inherently based on American ideologies. This cultural bias limits the potential for Gaia being a globally diverse assemblage.

The ‘American-ness’ of Gaia is evident in many of the conversations that take place within the guilds. For instance, the guild page of *The Conservatives of Gaia* portrays an American flag and states that this group is “for those tired of an oversized government, for those who remember that paper called the constitution.” *The Republican Party* guild proposes an “intellectual debate” between Romney or Obama for the presidency. And last, but not least, The

Pro-choice and *Pro-life* guilds both refer to American abortion laws numerous times in their conversations.

Pro- life: In the two decades before abortion was legal in the U.S....

Pro-choice: ...the law would be a direct challenge to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling.

An American identity is also enforced by the website through its enforcement of “governing laws.” As noted in the terms of service section on Gaia, all terms “will be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California, without giving effect to any principles of conflicts of law.” Through the implication of state specific laws, Gaian officials are essentially implying that Gaia is an extension of the United States of America and, thus, only American customs and etiquette will be tolerated. In terms of function and demographics, it seems legitimate to assert that Gaia, in some ways, is a highly molarized space that operates according to fixed pathways and adheres to an American cultural identity. However, it is still important to recognize that Gaia is an assemblage composed of a continuum of overlapping lines (molar, molecular, and lines of flight). The following section continues to examine some of the more striating as well as smoother mechanisms evident in Gaia.

Another way that Gaia can resemble more striated space is that it contains a significant amount of corporate advertising and capitalist influences, both of which operate within striated space (Ringrose, 2011, p.601; Buchanan, 2007, p.14). Although originality may emerge in the smoother spaces of virtual communities, capitalist mechanisms are always attempting to find new ways to appropriate, commodify, and re-territorialise creative lines of flight (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p.16; Skott-Myhre, 2008, p.154). Capitalism must control people’s desires as well as appropriate creative lines of flight in order to maintain control over the masses and benefit from

economic growth. That being said, it seems obvious that capitalist mechanisms would find their way into Gaia. From a capitalist perspective, Gaia is a relatively new space with seemingly boundless potential for making profit. In this sense, it could be argued that Gaia began as deterritorializing line of flight in that it was new and full of possibility; however, it was eventually captured and reterritorialized as striated space by capitalist mechanisms and the state apparatus. Initially, young people seek escape from traditional forms of everyday communication by the creation of new methods of interaction – *lines of flight*. These lines of flight, however, are quickly reterritorialised by striating mechanisms with the goal of making the space productive and profitable. When this reterritorialisation occurs, new lines of flight emerge and once again deterritorialize the space. However, these lines of flight are once again appropriated by molarizing mechanisms such as capitalism; and thus an ongoing dynamic between reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation occurs.

Reterritorialisation is evident in Gaia through the abundance of advertisements. While the majority of the ads are for the site, there are also numerous Ford and Glade advertisements on each page. These ads can only be disabled “when you buy an item worth \$249 Gaia cash or more” (Gaia, 2012). Gaia cash can be obtained in three ways: by purchasing it with ‘real’ money, by playing and winning games, or by becoming a subscription member. Although a basic Gaia membership is free, users can choose to purchase a subscription membership (\$10/month) where they are “entitled to receive all subscription membership benefits including, \$200 bonus Gaia cash every month, and an exclusive bonus item for every three months [they] stay signed up!” This ‘exclusive members’ system inevitably produces social hierarchies and unequal privileges where the ‘haves’ are at more of an advantage than the ‘have not’s.’ Thus reinforcing and reproducing the existence of binary oppositions and static molar codes.

As noted by Deleuze and Guattari, a very prevalent binary molar code that operates within western societies is gender (male/female). As mentioned previously, the online world is reflective of the offline world. Because Gaia has adopted a predominately American cultural identity, the social reproduction of gender norms/expectations that can be seen in American culture are also evident in Gaia. Similar to Kenall's (2002) research on gender identity in virtual communities, gender and appropriate gender behaviour are defined through clothing choice and participant interactions within Gaia. The avatars and clothing choices offered by the site reinforce gender norms and binary codes by providing options that conform to hegemonic ideals of femininity and masculinity. To become a Gaia member, users must first choose a gender for their avatar to represent them while they are in the online world. Although Gaia claims that, "you define your look: be quirky, cute, scary, heroic or even nerdy. It's all up to you," the options offered are very limited and leave little room for real choice and difference. The pictures below show the basic avatar and clothing choices available when signing up for the website for the first time.



Female avatar



Clothing choices for female avatar



Male avatar



Clothing choices for male avatar

Gaia users must choose the gender, clothing, skin colour, hair and facial features for their avatar before gaining access to the website. Once an avatar has been created, it can only be changed by purchasing virtual goods using Gaian cash. Overt sexism can also be seen in the conversations that take place within the Gaia guilds, predominately towards women. In the following passages Gaia members from various guilds use objectifying terms such as ‘girl’ and ‘woman’ to belittle fellow members with whom they do not agree.

In the Obama Sucks guild, TimTam wrote:

Girl, you better study on Bush because it was NOT HIS FAULT that we are in trouble.
It's America's fault.

In the Republican Party guild, Sandeen wrote:

You disgust me with your comments. The truth is very real and it might not sound good to an uneducated person like yourself. Good bye *immature girl*

In the Republican guild, FangY wrote:

You obviously wouldn't know this because *you are a woman* but the constitution is the law here.

These binary molar codes are used by certain members as tools to assert power and dominance over others. The term ‘girl’ implies less than man and less than adult, the term ‘woman’ similarly implies less than man. Both are meant to imply that girls and women are less than the majoritarian and therefore inferior, illegitimate sources of information. It is important to note that while these instances of overt molar sexism do exist in Gaia, this type of language is not typical of most interactions that were encountered for this project. There are situations where molecular lines disturb molarized gender identification.

Similarly to gender, the prejudices that play out in regular society—such as racism—are also manifest in Gaia. Skin colour choice is somewhat less limited than gender choice; however facial features (mouth, nose, eyes) and hair choices reflect predominantly white characteristics. Such facial features include round eyes, thin shaped lips, small thin pointy noses, and straight or wavy hair.



Skin Colour Options

The above picture depicts the various skin colour choices that are available on Gaia, however if none of these options work for you, then you can get really creative—and choose to be a blue alien. The blue alien character has some disruptive potential in that it offers Gaian members an alternative to choosing a ‘real world’ race. However, people who opt for the alien character must still choose from the list of predominantly white facial features mentioned above. This lack of choice and flexibility with regards to avatar selection makes it difficult for Gaian members to disrupt molarized racial codes.



Blue Alien

Overt molar racism is also evident within the Gaian guild forums. There are numerous Nazi Guilds that openly advocate for an Aryan race and white supremacy. For example, *The United Gaian Nazi Guild's* homepage suggests that "we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." These overt instances of intolerance are not seen as problematic by Gaian officials who seem to be more concerned about members using profanities, “saying [they] are under 13 years old, soliciting or offering sexually explicit content, and making threats against

government officials” (Siskatya, *Gaia Online Safety Lead*). Obvious racism can also be seen in the following passage from *The African American Guild*, posted in 2011.

Carn: Its messed up that i cant walk into a rally without being called name's because of my race iv probably reported over 500 people over the 3 years iv been on gaia because of racist people on gaia

Fella: all we can do is ignore the people blinded by ignorance on this site....

Partin: Its funny. We are the "N" word. But using it is ignorant. So wouldn't the user be the "N" word?

In the above passage, black Gaia users struggle with the racism that they experience as a result of molar attitudes about race; attitudes that perceive skin colour as an essential component of one's identity and a defining characteristic of one's worth as a human being. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that racism

operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavours to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves, sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions in a given ghetto, sometimes erasing them from the wall, that never abides alternity. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.178)

In other words, white is a distinct and absolute category from which all other races are only considered in terms of how much they deviate. Non-white races are categorised into various levels of deviation (from white); “it's a Jew, it's an Arab, it's a Negro” (p.178). These molarized racial and gender categories are detrimental to the process of becoming. They thwart difference, possibility, and potentiality by reinforcing the idea that “there are only people who should be like us [white, adult, male] and those whose crime it is not to be” (p.178).

All of these molar influences attempt to categorise and stabilize identity by reinforcing social binaries and hierarchies. However, it is important to note that the endeavours of molar mechanisms do not necessarily mean that lines of flight such as creativity and difference are only doomed to eternal territorialisation. Simultaneously, as one line of flight may be re-territorialized, a new line may be formed that flees the confines of striated space and becomes deterritorialized. Smooth space continuously erupts from within striated space and online virtual communities will experience destabilizing mechanisms within their virtual city walls (Shavero, 1995). Rules, regulations and authority are generally thought of as very striating mechanisms. While this may be true in some ways, rules can also be an area in which interesting negotiations take place. In Gaia, there is interplay of molar and molecular lines that can be seen through the operation of rules and regulations, on one hand, and resistance, on the other.

A Continuum of Lines: Gaian Rules, Regulations, Guidelines

Gaian members are monitored on numerous levels, including by *Gaia* administrators, moderators, guild administrators, and other members. There are countless occurrences of rule enforcement by Gaian officials and just as many ‘friendly reminders’ about the rules between Gaian users. While conducting research for this project, I came up against many barriers as the result of molar mechanisms including Gaian rules and segmented attitudes. As noted by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), not only are the great molar aggregates (states, institutions, classes) segmented, but so are people, feelings and relations between people; “they are segmented, not in such a way as to disturb or disperse, but on the contrary to ensure and control the identity of each agency, including personal identity” (p.195). During my time on Gaia, I came across several instances where segmented attitudes attempted to (and eventually did) prevent me from completing my intended research.

My intention for this project was to conduct a number of asynchronous focus groups within some of the political guilds in Gaia. These focus groups were to be directed by a pre-determined list of questions regarding political participation posted within each guild. Unfortunately, only a few participants responded to the questions before my posts were deleted and I was nearly banned from Gaia. Shortly after posting the questions, I received the following email from Gaia's online site moderator, Dlin.

Hello Chloe Roxy,

This is an official warning from Gaia Online for Spamming ♦ Making Spam Threads.

Sorry, but Gaia is not a place for you to conduct your form of scholarly research which seems to require you to spam the forums with off topic copy pasty threads. Gaia is an active community and its users are not research subjects. They deserve your respect and a place to peacefully enjoy being social with each other and discuss those topics of interest to them.

Threads which are off-topic, gibberish, or have low or no content are considered spam.

Please be aware that continuing this behaviour could potentially result in further actions being taken, up to and including a permanent account ban.

Dlin

Gaia Online Site Moderator

My attempts to do research within Gaia were not only thwarted by Gaian staff, but they were also condemned by other Gaian members. Although not indicative of all of the responses that I received, there were a number of people who openly voiced their dislike for my attempts to recruit participants within Gaia. The following comments are in response to my request for "help with research."

Wending: don't go spammin' this stuff around, that's no good.

HollyC: I can't believe any reputable university would allow someone to do research here. Go to a library!

FantasyX: Your project makes little sense.

Tanner: Show your credentials and maybe we will help you. Actually, on second thought no we won't.

From one perspective, it could be argued that the above responses depict molar attitudes in that they attempt to set standards for how people should act while in Gaia. From this perspective, the responses reinforce the idea that there are some people who belong in the virtual community and others who do not. These attitudes are based on binary ideas of exclusion in which those who do not conform to what is deemed appropriate behaviour, as determined by the dominant group, do not belong; in this case, the researcher. If a member does not live up to the standards or expectations of the virtual community, then they are rejected and pushed out even if they legally have the right to be there. Similar to the offline world, group inclusion in Gaia is not attainable by everybody and is reserved for a select few, who are able to abide by the rules, as determined by the owners of the site. From an alternative perspective, it could be argued that the above responses are molecular and resistant. Perhaps these members see my research objectives as molarizing and are resisting my endeavours to study and categorise them as research participants. In this sense, these Gaia users may see my presence and research as striating mechanisms attempting to appropriate their Gaian guilds for the purpose of advancing the academic institution; Deleuze and Guattari (1987) saw the institution as one of the great molar segments. If this is the case, then the previous responses are more indicative of molecular resistance, than molar attitudes about inclusion and exclusion. However, from a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical

perspective molar and molecular lines are not mutually exclusive categories. Thus, it could be argued that the above responses contain both molar and molecular elements that operate simultaneously, constantly changing and transforming into one another. As previously noted, all assemblages (Gaia included) are composed of bundles of traversing lines (p. 202). There are instances in Gaia where molecular lines do erupt from within the molar segments.

In a “sticky note” (meaning that the thread cannot get pushed back out of view by other threads) posted within the chatterbox forum, Siskatya (Gaia Online Safety Lead) warns users that certain comments within the forum will not be tolerated. In the note Siskatya states that,


“we here in the office love a good joke as much as anyone ... (however when) "jokes" cross the line from humorous into subjects that pose safety issues for the Gaia community... we are **legally obligated to consider the joke as a serious statement of fact, and usually have to ban the account that made the joke. In fact, in certain cases, we have to forward the content to the authorities (original emphasis).**”

While Siskatya acknowledges that she is “almost certain that most of these statements are not meant seriously” she stresses that it is her job to remind members of the rules in order “to help (them) all steer clear of possibly losing (their) account, or even having to be sent to the authorities, for making an inappropriate comment.” From this passage it is evident that the goal of the *Gaia* administrators is to create a molarized space built upon authority, rules, and order. Gaia’s online site moderator, Dlin, justifies this level of regulation by claiming that rules and guidelines are necessary in order to “keep Gaia a safe, fun place for all members!” In response, several *Gaia* users made humorous comments in an attempt to destabilise the molar authority of *Gaia* staff and the content of the letter.

Evil Spagetti: sorry if i have anger issues

Wheezing Bloodsucker: achtung! der authorities! (attention! the authorities!) Oh I wonder if government officials is only for U.S or for everybody.

Blessed Explorer: curses! censored again!

Wheezing Prophet: lol my post was deleted 

Farrah Fawcett: gaia u think u can stop me well u cant cuz im a tough @\$ \$ puta

Zilyhoo: Oh so if we say "Jk" at the end of stuff its ok. k cool.

Last Donor: omg (oh my god)

Although these comments may not represent the radical ‘exploding’ from molar lines that signifies a line of flight, it could be argued they represent molecular lines in introducing turbulence by subtly resisting the desires of Gaian staff to create a highly molarized space. The users resist Gaian admin attempts at censorship by using the language of sarcasm. In this case, molecular becomings are occurring within the molar structures of Gaia by breaking apart and challenging the mechanisms that attempt to organize and control bodies and experiences. The above passage is an example of surveillance at the level of Gaian administration, equally as significant are the various levels of smoothness and striation that can be seen within the Gaian guild forums.

The Gaian Guild: Access and Sustainability

There are two types of guild forums within Gaia: private and public. While both types of guilds are created and maintained by an administrator or moderator, access to the private guilds is more restricted than the public. Private guilds forums can be seen by all Gaian users, but only members can post in the guild forum. Membership to the private guilds is determined by an application process. Potential members must send an application to the private guild administrator at which point he or she then decides whether or not membership will be granted.

Unlike the private guilds ‘member’s only’ policy, public guilds forums can be seen and posted in by anyone. Only members can be banned from a guild, so it's not possible to keep a user out of a public guild if they are not a member of the guild. Because public guilds have freer access than private guilds, they offer more opportunities for molecular interactions and lines of flight.

The majority of the private guilds are created to serve a specific purpose and unite people who share similar beliefs (The Republicans, Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, Marxist/Communist), whereas many of the public guilds are created with the intention of potentially producing new social relations and new worlds (*The Political Maniacs, The Round Table, The Truth Seekers, Politicians of Gaia*). For example, the homepage of the private *Marxist/Communist Guild* clearly stresses to potential members that this guild has a specific political ethos and that other political orientations are not welcome.

Marxist/Communist Guild homepage: “This guild has been created to collect all the communists and socialists on Gaia Online...This is a place that COMMUNISTS AND SOCIALISTS can come to talk about stuff. The guild is NOT here for Liberals... The guild is NOT here for Libertarians... The guild is NOT here so that anti-communists... [in] this guild SOCIALISM REIGNS.”

In contrast, the public guild *Politicians of Gaia* suggests that it is “a guild for those passionate about politics and want to debate ...it doesn't matter if you are liberal, conservative or moderate; everyone's views are welcome here.” The difference in terms of access between the public and private guilds may impact the diversity of the guild. For instance, in the public guilds, there is likely to be a ‘perceived openness’ to difference by the members; thus resulting in more people joining the guild and more diverse relations. Gaia users may be more likely to voice alternative opinions in the public guilds because these groups do not have overly strict membership

guidelines. However, in the private guilds that have clearly defined ideologies and membership guidelines, Gaia users may perceive these groups as unaccepting of difference, resulting in a smaller membership base and less diversity. The smaller membership base, however, may be perceived as advantageous by group members who feel more comfortable sharing their opinions amongst like-minded individuals. Although the two types of guilds differ in terms of access, it could be argued that they both have the potential to form molecular collective assemblages as they both offer opportunities for meaningful discussion, negotiation, and becoming. In this sense, Gaian guilds have the potential to represent smooth space as they encourage “diverse engagements, relationships, and transgressions” (Harper, 2009, p.137). The molecular line contains both smooth and striating elements (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 203). Both types of guilds similarly begin as molecular spaces; however, if they do not continuously change and adapt to the desires of the members then they eventually become reterritorialised into striated space. If the guilds cannot once again become de-territorialized, then they become perpetually territorialized. This perpetual territorialisation takes the form of stagnation; nothing in the group changes, no new members are added, and molar mechanisms are enforced to the point the lines of flight are no longer possible. Although there are numerous reasons for why guilds end, (ie. people leaving the guild and/or Gaia, lack of interest, and lack of leadership) one reason in particular for this perpetual territorialisation is that the guilds reach a state where they are unable to adapt to changing conditions and desires, resulting in the loss of productive negotiation and the potentiality for becoming *other*.

In the introduction of *Anti-Oedipus*, Seem (1984) wrote that “[o]nce we forget about our egos a non-neurotic form of politics becomes possible, where singularity and collectivity are no longer at odds with each other, and where collective expressions of desire are possible” (p. xxi).

In order for collective becomings to occur, people must forgo their needs to prove they are 'right' in favour of embracing multiple subjectivities and viewpoints. Unfortunately, this is an ideal that many of the guilds are unable to achieve. For most of the guilds, both public and private, productive negotiation eventually turns into arguing and truth claims begin to emerge. In an excerpt written by Tanzania, in the *Pro-Life Guild*, she says "so I joined a feminist...community because I was desperate to be a feminist. Suddenly I find that I am banned." She was banned from joining the feminist group because she was openly pro-life (against abortion). In response to Tanzania's application to join the feminist guild Bailey, the *Feminist Guild* administrator, wrote "DO NOT link to anti-choice websites to back up your argument. If what you are trying to say is true, you should be able to find it on an unbiased or pro-choice site. This is a feminist community; anti-choice comments are not welcome here." From this excerpt, it is evident that both Tanzania and Bailey were unwilling to waiver on their opinions about the morality of abortion, with the result that Tanzania was not allowed to join the feminist group. Consequently, the feminist guild becomes a more homogenous group with a fixed identity and little room for negotiation and possibility; it becomes molarized and striated. This similar theme emerges in most of the Gaian guilds. While the guilds may begin as lines of flight or molecular lines, they eventually become too molarized and ultimately cannot be sustained.

There are over 350 politically oriented guilds (established groups) in Gaia however most of them are currently inactive. There is only one group that has had regular postings in 2013. *The Truth Seekers* guild is a public group that was established in 2010. *The Truth Seekers* guild has the second largest member base out of all the political guilds with 1,173 members (beat only by "People Who Think 2012 Is FAKE!!!" with 1,536 members). The guild's homepage suggests

that if you are a “critical thinker ... [who] can think for yourself, question everything your told and [are] willing to research things for yourself” then you should “join us!” The guild boasts a “Matrix” themed homepage picturing Neo, the main character in the 1999 film “The Matrix,” trying to decide whether to take the blue pill or the red pill. The homepage encourages members to use the guild as a tool for looking critically at the government and fighting against oppressive governmental influences. The guild does not claim any formal political orientation (i.e. liberal, moderate, conservative); however, it still categorizes itself as an anti-government group. This is the only political guild in Gaia that experiences regular activity. There are a number of factors that contribute to the longevity of this guild, including that it does not have a traditional political orientation or fixed ideology, is publically accessible, and has a high user base.

In a virtual community that caters to nearly seven million people, it is interesting that most of the political guilds in Gaia are currently inactive. As is evident in the following passages, the idle political guilds did seem to experience at least some period of high activity during their lifespans; however they eventually died off.

The New Way Guild: trickster wrote:

something of great importance: the resurrection of this guild! I miss hearing, well reading, everyone’s different viewpoints and stuff! I just don’t know how to get people to come back 🙄

Pro Choice Gaians Guild: skipper wrote:

Hello you might not remember me... any way real life drama happened and I stopped being on Gaia then sort of forgot about it. I noticed this guild seems sort of inactive.

What happened?

United Gaian Nazi Guild: phanning wrote:

It would appear that all of our members are no longer active, which is a shame!... Never the less, I believe that with the little power I hold as the Vice, I'm going to try and bring back the guild.

The Lazy Hippie Movement: Felay wrote:

i knows prolly nobody will ever see this but i miss you, my interwebs friends!... can't believe we made this 5 years ago. i guess we are all grown up now or something. loves u guys.

Looking at this pattern from a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, the guilds are built upon a very specific and fixed ideology and they lack the ability to change and adapt, or deterritorialize. This inability to transform eventually leads to the demise of the guild and the overall unsustainability of the guilds as a whole.

For Deleuze and Guattari, two key features in the idea of becoming are possibility and potentiality. Becoming always involves experimenting with new subjectivities and different ways of seeing the world; becoming *other*. An identifiable feature of the Gaian guilds is they are created based on sameness rather than difference. While the guilds may begin as molecular lines, with the intention of moving away from molarity, once the guilds have a fixed identity or ideology their capacity to be productive and creative is constrained. If the guilds have been reterritorialised, they must once again deterritorialize and if they cannot do this, then they end. When bodies become homogenised and their desires controlled, the possibilities for resistance and difference are diminished. For Deleuze and Guattari, becomings imagine and put into practice new ways of moving through the world, new alliances and connections across fields of difference. Ultimately, the guilds are not formed on difference, but rather on overly strict

guidelines of ‘sameness’ and thus ‘becomings’ are no longer possible. Furthermore, *The Truth Seekers* longevity may be equated to its abundant membership base. Because there are a lot of people in the guild, if a few people leave it will not really have an impact. More people generally equates to longer conversations and more postings. Based on this analysis, it seems fair to argue that *The Truth Seekers* guild is perhaps the only guild that has been able to maintain a degree of process-based ‘becoming’ and sustainability. For this reason, it was the only guild closely analyzed for this research project.

The Truth Seekers Guild: A Desiring Assemblage

Youth, like all minorities, are lines of flight because they constitute an alternative to the majoritarian. Young people do not fit within the category of the majoritarian (white, adult, male) and as a result they are positioned on the outskirts of the borderline, thus comprising the ‘other.’ As noted by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “minorities constitute ‘fuzzy,’ non-denumerable or non-axiomatizable sets, in short ‘masses,’ or multiplicities of escape” (p.420). These minorities, such as youth and women, often escape “the binary organizations, the resonance apparatuses, and the overcoding machine” and can be attributed to a “change in values” (p.216). For Deleuze and Guattari, the ‘other’ is always molecular and always becoming. Young people are molecular becomings because they have heightened potential to be disruptive. This disruption often takes the form of resistance against molar segments, such as state apparatuses (government, church, family, education system). This resistance is propelled by the ‘body’s’ desire not to become coded, categorised, and fixed in space and time.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), desire is immanent; it is creative life force (p. 190). Lines of flight are instantiations of desire, and as such “constitute the productive force of change... which would question, unsettle, undermine, evade, or break up the static molar codes that rigidly define, identify, or represent the subject” (p. 190).

Based on this definition, *The Truth Seekers* guild is an example of a molecular space in which young people come together to form desiring assemblages premised on the notion of resisting molarized macro-entities. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “desire is collective; it is the quality of social relation that is actualised in collective production” (p.196). In other words, desire is collectively constructed in the bonds between people; it is what draws us into the process of mutual meaning making. Desire is constructed from past experiences and immanent relations between people; relations that can lead to creative resistance. Desire is revolutionary in its essence (Guattari and Negri, 1990, p. 126). It “becomes a drive to live a life of relation, creation, and intensity” (Goodchild, 1996, p.213). From a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, *The Truth Seekers* guild constitutes a collective assemblage of mutual empowerment, a desiring machine.

There are numerous ongoing forums that are currently taking place in *The Truth Seekers* guild; however, for the purpose of this study only one forum is analyzed in detail. The forum, entitled *The Intentional “Dumbing Down,”* pertains to the (mostly American) education system. The conversations that have been taking place within this forum began in 2010 and are ongoing. While Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas can be used to suggest that ‘youth’ is better understood as minoritarian and ‘becoming’ rather than a social category, most of the participants in this forum adhere to a self-understanding of ‘youth’ as a category. The conversations that take place in this forum directly challenge dominant discourses that perceive young people as apolitical beings. What is suggested instead is through the use of *The Truth Seekers* guild young people have the potential to occupy smoother space through their desire for resistance (against domination), creativity, and free speech.

In the following passage, from *The Intentional “Dumbing Down”* forum, guild administrator TutherMay suggests that,

The "Dumbing Down" of people today has not been a thing of the present of the last few years, say 9/11, but in American society it has been going on for more than a century. In recent years however, it has become more apparent that we are taught nothing in school [...] High Literacy is not taught in the current education system. High Literacy opens a mind to the world, making one curious, asking questions. For the elite, questions are brooms to move the dust that covers secrets, so they dumb down the masses, keeping those rich to become richer and the poor becoming poorer. We need to do something about our (American) educational system!

In this passage, TrutherMay is introducing a molecular line as a means to challenge dominant systems of thought and social conditions. By suggesting that “we need to do something” she insinuates that social and cultural revolution can only be achieved through the form of collective action; a desiring machine. Although TrutherMay does not elaborate on what specifically “needs to be done” in order to improve the (American) education system, she does spark an interesting conversation that, despite some lapses of inactivity, has managed to continue for the past three years.

Since the start of the *Intentional “Dumbing Down”* forum, *The Truth Seekers* members have managed to form a desiring machine built upon the mutual goal of disrupting molar lines. What is most remarkable about the three year long conversation is that all of the participants generally stay on topic, without intervention from the administrator, and there is little to no overtly argumentative comments. People do disagree about topics, but these disagreements are dealt with in a relatively peaceful and respectful manner. For instance, Amanie suggested that

people should “read books from the early 1900’s; They’re so hard to follow because of their amazing language skills.” In response, Felix noted that “I find some of those books hard to read because it seems like no one knew what a run-on sentence was back then. I agree that the vocabulary was of a higher caliber. You can find the same thing today if you read more scholarly works though. Just my two cents.” Although Felix did not agree with Amanie, he voiced his opinion in a way that still valued hers. *The Truth Seekers* guild differs from some of the other political guilds because there seems to be a general sense of openness to experience and difference. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, *The Truth Seekers* guild is an assemblage where collective expressions of desire and becomings are possible. While writing this chapter many questions arose including: “To what extent do the Truth Seekers draw on molar lines even while trying to disrupt them?” “How quickly do disruptions get reabsorbed into the molar?” The following chapter attempts to address these questions.

The Truth Seekers Guild: Molecular Resistance

A key component of the line of flight is it produces something new that cuts across the molar. These disturbances often take on the form of resistance and should be interpreted loosely to include various levels of violation. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the line of flight “never consists in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs....There is nothing imaginary, nothing symbolic, about a line of flight. There is nothing more active than a line of flight” (pp. 225-6). While it may be true that lines of flight are active, this does not mean they are necessarily revolutionary. From one perspective, lines of flight can take the form of active resistance to molar codification of life by others (e.g., the state, the institution, the class system) and the “purposeful expression of desire not to become sedentary, coded, classified, fixed in space and time” (Deuchars, 2011, n.p.). However, resistant lines of flight can also take

the form of one's desires for freedom, not necessarily *from* but, freedom *to* construct alternatives "on the immanent plane of social life" and recognise different modes of becoming (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 16; Deuchars, 2011, n.p). This latter form of resistance is more about "local struggles that 'disrupt' institutions and normalisation rather than" revolutionary change (Martin as cited in Raby, 2005, p. 162). Both forms of resistance are lines of flight in that they have the power to not only escape control, but also to create a new world (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p.61).

The Truth Seekers guild is a forum for desiring-resistance; however, it is one of relatively little significance when it comes to the consideration of revolutionary opposition against the state apparatus. Yet *The Truth Seekers* guild still contains resistant lines of flight. These lines of flight, however, are more concerned with constructing and imagining new becomings than with evoking active resistance. While *The Truth Seekers* guild (and Gaia as a whole) is perceived as a place where people can voice their opinions and desires, it is not always seen as a space for revolutionary change. This notion is mirrored in the following responses to the question: "Do you think that Gaia and/or this forum is an effective way to voice your opinions on political matters and/or to bring about societal change? Why or why not?"

HayZ: No. Posting on Gaia is like writing your wishes on slips of paper and then setting those pieces of paper on fire. It might make you feel good, but this site is pretty low down on the pyramid of respected sources of opinion and discourse. At the top is anything your parents would recognize if you were to mention it to them.

FearLess: No. Gaia is not big enough. There's not enough membership. I mean, don't get me wrong, there is a diversity, but I don't think it's big enough to do any real change.

BlueViolet: TO voice my opinions? Yes due to the simple fact that anyone can make an account and post here. To bring about societal change? No. The user base is too small to

make much of a difference in the big picture, and I doubt the Government is keeping an eye on us.

These responses indicate how Gaia is perceived by its users as being ‘too small and insignificant’ to operate as a space for active resistance. These members, however, conceptualize change and resistance in a very structured manner as resistance, in their view, has to be effective in some way. This molar conceptualization of resistance does not recognize that micro acts of disruption can also be considered lines of flight. *The Truth Seekers* guild provides its members with a venue for disrupting institutions and normalizing mechanisms. In this sense, *The Truth Seekers* guild has the potential to act as smooth space where lines of flight can escape control and create new worlds and new becomings, which I discuss below.

Although lines of flight do erupt within the smooth spaces of *The Truth Seekers* guild, the virtual group also contains molarizing elements, such as organisation and structure. The line of flight is resistance, chaotic, unorganised, and decentred. The molecular is also resistant in how it continually dismantles molar segmentarity; however, unlike the line of flight, everything the molecular dismantles it reassembles and organises on its own level (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 205). This reterritorialisation is a necessary component of the assemblage, a line of flight that is unable to connect to other molecular lines will eventually lead to destruction. All three types of lines (molar, molecular, lines of flight) are necessary to the assemblage in that “all progress is made by and in striated space, but all becoming occurs in smooth space” (p. 486). While *The Truth Seekers* guild (and *Gaia*) could be considered molecular spaces, they must also contain lines of flight to remain sustainable through processual becoming.

Lines of Flight and Becoming

Although *The Truth Seekers* guild is a molecular line, lines of flight must and do erupt within the confines of this molecular space. Possible lines of flight may erupt due to the facelessness and anonymity of the internet which enables Gaia users to experiment with subject positions, multiplicities, and potentialities. These lines of flight are only specific to the online world. Unlike the offline world where physical bodies (and the social conventions associated with them) dictate what people can and cannot do, the virtual sphere is bodiless in that one's real body cannot be seen by others. Gaia is a space where people can embrace a line of flight by escaping "from a singular position on the grid of normativity" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 95-97). *Gaia* has the potential to operate as a smoother space by providing opportunities for its members to free themselves, if only temporarily, from some of the codifications that determine behaviour. These moments of escape enable users to test out subject positions they may not be able to occupy in their offline lives and ultimately engage in the process of becoming *other*. In the following passages, Gaian users respond to the question: "Do you think that Gaia is a space where people can speak about issues that they wouldn't necessarily be able to speak about in the offline world? Is so, in what ways?"

Tides: Gaia's definitely a place to talk about stuff that i normally wouldn't talk about in the first place, part of it's the anonymity, but mostly it's because i'm sure there are others that share the same viewpoints as i do.

Cameron: of course you can get away with saying crazy stuff on this site, as you can WITH ANY SITE ON THE INTERNET

FearLess: That's generally the entire internet. The veil of anonymity it gives people makes them more likely to act in ways they wouldn't face to face (Take Cameron up there).

BlueViolet: Yes [...] real life imposes the possibility of social stigma for people who advocate certain extreme positions; any online forum provides the shield of interacting with mostly anonymous strangers on the one hand and a carefully cultivated core of kindred spirits and sycophants on the other hand.

These Gaian members feel as though the online nature of Gaia enables them to talk about things that they would not necessarily be able to talk about in their offline lives. For these members, the anonymity of Gaia creates opportunities for new ways of interacting and the creation of new assemblages. In this sense, *Gaia* functions as smoother spaces in that it supports “the invention of new forms of the relation to the self and others, and... the creation of new subjectivities” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 58-9).

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), every real body has *a priori* traits, habits, and movements which are already part of that body’s production; however, every real body also has a virtual element that includes potential traits, habits, and movements (p. 151). The potential aspects of the body are what constitute the body in becoming *other*. These potentials can be achieved through interaction with other bodies and through ‘becomings.’ We can get closer to becoming *other* by experimenting with subjectivities. When becoming is achieved it can exponentially multiply the body’s potential and possibility for multiple identities (Massumi, 1992, p. 102). The becoming body “does not simply react to a set of social constraints,” it converts them into opportunities for alternative subjectivities (p. 102). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the biological organization of organs limits the body’s potential for becoming. The “forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchical organizations” that are placed on the organs work to create an organism that is constrained within a fixed identity (p. 159). Words and ideas organize the body and ultimately produce unconscious ‘truths’ about how certain bodies should

look and act; truths that frequently attempt to thwart becoming. The ultimate goal is to momentarily dismantle the organization of the organs so that becoming can occur (p. 161). *Gaia* users do have real bodies but, in cyberspace, they can experiment with the organization of their real organs by acting out alternative subjectivities. Within *Gaia*, one can occupy multiple subjectivities and, thus, temporarily escape the confines of the social codifications placed on his/her real body. For example, an individual can play with and alter their gender, age, race, and sexuality online; something that may not be plausible in the offline world (Turtle, 1995). Through this experimentation with subjectivities one gets closer to becoming *other*; a body not determined by molarizing social binaries such as man/women and child/adult.

As noted previously in the section on striation, molar perceptions of gender are reinforced in multiple ways on Gaia. However, there are instances in which Gaian members are able to break free from molarized gender codes. One of the more radical ways that potentially represents a line of flight is by remaining gender neutral. There are many instances in which *Gaia* members do not reveal their gender, have gender neutral names, or choose avatars that do not align with gender specifics. Gaia users can choose whether or not to reveal a gender on their profile page. The following pictures depict avatars from two Gaian members who chose not to reveal a gender.



Onyx



Cipruss

These character options however, are not available to everyone. As stated earlier, characters can only be changed by purchasing virtual goods using Gaia cash; cash may not be accessible by

everyone. This sets up an interesting social hierarchy in which the wealthier members can potentially buy the possibility of disrupting social conventions, while the members with less economic capital cannot. The fact that gender neutrality must be purchased could also be a way in which capitalist mechanisms attempt to maintain control over people's desires. Furthermore, users who want to change their characters must have the skills and knowledge needed to do so. Gender neutrality may be a luxury reserved for only those who can afford it and who are able to skillfully navigate the Gaian space.

Yet another way that Gaian users subvert gender roles is by adopting the opposite gender. While this may be a legitimate attempt to destabilise binary identity codes, it cannot be considered a line of flight; it is a molecular line. In some ways, Gaia enables its users to experiment with subjectivities and act out potential traits, habits, and movements that they are unable to access in their physical bodies; however, while this may be an example of 'smoother space' it should not be considered true smooth space because there are situations where the virtual body still adheres to social norms and codifications. Virtual representations of real bodies exist simultaneously as objects in the world and in the minds of users as mental representations imbued with meaning (Jones, 2011, p.323). Representations of the body have their own sets of social constraints. Thus the popular 'gender swap' among Gaia residents cannot be considered a line of flight because as soon as any gender is assumed, so too are the molar codes that define it. Although simply switching genders is not an example of a line of flight, it is still a molecular line that is harder to embrace in the offline world. This ability to experiment with subject positions is what makes Gaia different from offline youth-focused groups. Significant to this research project in particular is the ways in which young people use Gaia to destabilise the binary logic of dichotomy between child/adult.

The Truth Seekers Guild: Becoming-Child

The idea of ‘becoming’ is significant for much of Deleuze and Guattari’s writing. As discussed earlier, there are various sorts of becoming; one of which is: ‘becoming-child.’ From this perspective, there is no such thing as a universal child. What exists instead is ‘child’ as immanent becoming; child as the ‘minoritarian’ which we all (adult or child) become. Becoming-child entails the passage away from binary opposites and traditional modes of thinking in favour of a fluid identity and multiplicities. As noted by Deleuze and Parnet (1987), becoming does not speak of “dualisms between two kinds of ‘things’ but of a multiplicity of dimensions, lines and directions in the heart of the assemblage” (pp. 132-3). Every ‘body’ or assemblage is composed of various becomings, becoming-child included. Becoming-child is one of the multiple subjectivities that an individual may experience in his/her lifetime. In this sense, childhood is a momentary event rather than a developmental stage or platform (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.8). Becoming-child opposes traditional concepts of childhood that see children as needing to accomplish certain developmental stages before reaching the goal of adulthood. These traditional modernist theories of childhood often view children as vulnerable, irresponsible, immature, and inferior to adults. Becoming-child challenges these modernist perspectives on childhood by suggesting there is no such thing as a universal child; instead, what exists is ‘child’ as the ‘minoritarian’ which we all become. Unlike modernist theories that view childhood as a stage to overcome, becoming-child suggests that ‘child’ is an event that occurs multiple times throughout one’s life. *The Truth Seekers* guild acts as a smooth space where young people can potentially escape the striated confines of modernist age-related specifications by experimenting with postmodern multiplicities.

A noteworthy passage from *The Intentional “Dumbing Down* forum portrays a molarized perception of youth as a social category as not only fixed, but also problematic. A thread started by *The Truth Seekers* member, Obscurus, suggested that the problem with America today is the deteriorating state of youth. This is a predominant molar attitude found in dominant discourses about young people. Certain molarized perceptions of youth see young people as ‘troubled.’ This discourse can be seen in the following passage:

Obscurus: I think most of it has to do with the kids not actually having to learn anything to get anywhere... Then after the basics are down, they don't really have to learn anything important ever again. You can just watch TV. Why bother reading a book? That's slow and boring. 🙄

The responses to this passage are indicative of how molecular and molar lines can simultaneously operate within an assemblage. While the responses attempt to challenge molar assumptions of young people as being universally troubled and lazy, they also adhere to the idea of categorization.

RovenGale: When I lived in Germany I was starving for information and im a “kid” I read constantly, which got me reading college text books in no time.

Philippa: im a “kid” too and very rarely do I not have a stack of new books waiting to be read. Bookstores are my wallet's kryptonite.

Shystya: Same, only it is my dad's wallet. 🙄

SassyLass: actually I find myself being more intelligent than my teachers quite frequently [...] I've only had 2 teachers that I thought were truly qualified to teach anyone anything, and I usually end up teaching 1/2 the class in history.

JBird: I go to what's apparently considered one of the best public high schools in America (they have this newspaper laminated and framed in the lobby and they mention it all the time) and I have to take AP everything to feel like I'm actually doing any work.



From these passages it could be argued that *The Truth Seekers* guild operates as a continuum of smooth and striated spaces. On the one hand, the responses contain molecular lines in that the young people question the concept of youth as a universal stage experienced by everyone in the same way. On the other hand, however, the youth also employ molarizing language by self-categorizing themselves as 'kids.'

From a molecular perspective, these young Gaia users are attempting to destabilise modernist perspectives of young people as 'not yet adults'; perspectives attempting to limit their potential. Furthermore, these young people are challenging adult-led stereotypes that attempt to categorise youth as a social problem. For these young Gaians, youth is not a social category that implies less (smart, responsible, driven) than adult. Rather, youth is only one event in an assemblage composed of multiple events and experiences that constantly changes and therefore cannot be universalised. The way the word 'kids' is used in quotation marks could also be an example of molecular deterritorialisation of language in which the youth members are attempting to problematize the use of the word. The two members who use the word adopt its usage from the initial posting in the conversation. Obscurus refers to young people as 'kids' and suggests they are the cause for the problems with the education system. In response RovenGale and Philippa also use the word 'kid' in an attempt to undermine Obscurus' authority by co-opting his/her language. These two members deterritorialize modernist ideas associated with young people by reclaiming the term 'kid' and expanding its definition to include the varying capacities

and potentials of youth. These young people may see themselves as ‘kids’; however, they also see themselves as students AND scholars AND teachers – “passing through subject positions but never really permanently inhabiting any of them” (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 370). The AND between the terms implies that a person “is neither the one nor the other, nor the one which becomes the other, but which constitutes the multiplicity” (Deleuze and Parnet, 1977, pp. 34-35). However, it should be noted that the use of the word ‘kids’ could also be indicative of molar lines. In the above quotes the young people draw on molar lines even while trying to disrupt them. For example, there are two instances where the youth self-categorise themselves as ‘kids.’ This molarizing language re-enforces the idea that childhood is a static stage separate from adulthood.

Political Chatterbox Forum: Potential Lines of Flight

While working on this project a few questions arose concerning the line of flight. Is it possible to ever really pinpoint a line of flight? If lines of flight are often fleeting and instantaneous, then how can they be observed? Lines of flight are new and innovative, but can anything truly be new? Perhaps the answer to these questions is that lines of flight may not be entirely perceptible. They are after all a process, rather than a point in time (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 478). Nevertheless, in the next section I discuss a possible example of a line of flight. I do not wish to claim it is a definitive example of a line of flight as I am not sure that genuine lines of flight can be captured within an organised space such as *Gaia*; however, I do believe the political chatterbox forum has the capacity to elicit more lines of flight than other areas of *Gaia*.

The political chatterbox forum contains hundreds of sub forums (assemblages) that are constantly being transformed into new groups or assemblages, thus resulting in new possibilities

for becoming. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987) becoming does not occur in isolation, rather it is the capacity for bodies to affect and be affected (p. 239). This capacity is what constitutes an assemblage in which bodies can only function as they connect with other bodies in a constant process of becoming (Tamboukou, 2008, p. 366). Affect only exists in a multiplicity, that is, in relation to other bodies. A multiplicity cannot be defined by singular elements or by a central power; it is composed of a number of dimensions that can only operate in relation to one another. If a multiplicity loses or gains a dimension, it is forever changed (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 249). A multiplicity always gains and loses dimensions, resulting in continual change and processual becoming. Every time, the multiplicity changes a new assemblage is formed.

The political chatterbox forum in Gaia is a place where people can discreetly post questions or statements related to politics to which others can respond. There is no membership required and no one can be kicked out or banned (except by Gaian officials). The topics of conversations are usually fleeting and eventually die off; however they often erupt into a line of flight, thus leading to the formation of new conversations and assemblages. These forums (assemblages) are constantly changing and rearranging, adding people, taking people away, changing directions, but they never stay the same. Each new forum creates “another possible community and . . . the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 17). The forums are defined by their openness, instability, tendency to transform, and their resistance to regulation. Most importantly, they are governed by a logic of access rather than possession; no one owns the chatterbox forums and everybody is allowed in (Bayne, 2005, p.306). Within the chatterbox forums, no individual has mastery over a specific domain; all action is collective because a collective way of living is constructed (Goodchild, 1996, p. 196). One Gaian member who regularly partakes in the political chatterbox forums is

Wendingo. Wendingo has either started a thread or posted in another person's thread over 500 times in the last three months. The instant nature of Gaia and the internet ensures that Wendingo is constantly and simultaneously able to enter into new assemblages, form new relations, new multiplicities, and new becomings. Depending on Wendingo's position within each assemblage, at a given point in time, she/he may have different capacities that are activated within each one. Certain lines of flight enable Wendingo to affect or be affected depending on the specific space and time configurations (Ringrose, 2011, 603). While on Gaia, Wendingo is able to simultaneously perform a multiplicity of roles and adopt multiple subject positions; something that she/he may not be able to do in the offline world. Below are a few examples of postings that Wendingo made over the course of one day. Although these particular postings may not be representative of lines of flight they do demonstrate the expanse of Wendingo's simultaneous involvement in multiple groups and conversations.

Wendingo's response to a conversation started called "Obamacare":

Obama's was the second attempt at health care reform, and the second to be met with claims that it was a stepping stone to socialist fascism by the usual suspects for those accusations.

Wendingo's response to a conversation started called "The American college education system":

A well-thought-out argument in a position paper will be graded higher than a poorly-thought-out argument in a position paper. Although the very worst professors can be biased politically, or along racial or gender lines... you will still get good grades if you're an intelligent person, do your work, and are polite with your professor and fellow students.

Wendingo's response to a conversation started called "The ideal government model":

I think that the US Declaration of Independence stated one thing very well - that governments derive their just powers "from the consent of the governed." It happens that I agree that a government which does not have the consent of the people whom it governs is not a legitimate government.

The above quotes are only a few of the comments that were made by Wendingo on this particular day. Each of these comment were made in a different group within a three hour time period.

Although Wendingo is obviously very interested in politics and world issues in general, all of his/her comments are about different topics. In this sense Wendingo is enacting out multiple subject positions in that he/she is able to position himself within several different groups and conversations at one time. Furthermore Wendingo is never overly argumentative and doesn't seem to claim any particular political standpoint; rather he/she seems more inclined to argue multiple perspectives and thus engage in a process of becoming *other*.

As noted previously, lines of flight are fleeting and instantaneous. Therefore, it is essential for them to connect with other lines (whether other lines of flight, molecular lines, and/or molar lines) in order for processual becoming to occur. If lines of flight are unable to connect with other lines, then they have the potential to run away with themselves and become a line of abolition or destruction (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 142). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue all three types of lines (molar, molecular, lines of flight) are necessary to the assemblage because all progress is made by and in molarized striated space, but all becoming occurs in molecular smooth space (p. 486). Similar to the guilds, there are instances in the chatterbox forum where lines of flight are not able to connect with other lines. At this point, the forums

reach a permanent state of deterritorialisation that eventually results in their demise. However there are also instances in which chatterbox forum conversations are able to continuously engage in a circular process of reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. This circular movement occurs more often in the chatterbox forums than in the guild forums because chatterbox forums are less organized and hierarchical, which results in more opportunities and potential for lines of flight.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Using a Deleuzo-Guattarian theoretical framework, this thesis suggests that the politically oriented social forums in the virtual community *Gaia Online* are experienced as a continuum of overlapping of lines, including molar lines, lines of flight, and molecular lines. Although smooth lines of flight may occur in Gaia, there are always mechanisms that work to re-territorialize them as more striated molar operations. Conversely, while more striated molar lines may be evident in Gaia, there are also smooth lines of flight that attempt to deterritorialize them as smooth space. Lines of flight, however, are not always easily perceptible in Gaia because they are often momentary and fleeting. It could be argued that lines of flight are perhaps a rarity in Gaia because it is an overtly structured and monitored space where neo-Nazi political groups and other such hyper- reactionary politics are normalized. That being said, Gaia still does have the potential to help in the formation of rhizomatic molecular communications and immanent relations.

Gaia in particular offers new modes of molecular communication, such as instant messaging and virtual interactions, which can lead to new political forms and networks of power relations, rhizomatic structures, and new desiring assemblages. However, because the virtual world is reflective of the offline world, it cannot escape some of the striated social relations that operate within real life. As a result, some of the striating mechanisms that operate in the offline world are also evident in Gaia. Some of these mechanisms include more obvious molar structures such as, cultural hierarchies, unequal privileges, gender stereotypes, discrimination, and intolerance, as well as more benign molar mechanisms such as the categorization and organisation of bodies. Collections of individuals with capitalist motives are also increasingly

entering spaces like Gaia in an attempt to control people's desires. These capitalist conquests are constantly appropriating creative lines of flight in order to maintain control over the masses and benefit from economic growth. Although striating mechanisms are evident in Gaia, there are instances in which molecular becomings occur within the molar structures of Gaia by breaking apart and challenging the mechanisms that attempt to organize and control bodies and experiences. Young people are molecular becomings who have heightened potential to be disruptive. This disruption often takes the form of resistance to molar segments such as state apparatuses (government, church, family, education system). This resistance is propelled by the 'body's' desire not to become coded, categorised, and fixed in space and time. In Gaia, young participants can potentially escape the striated confines of age-related specifications by experimenting with postmodern multiplicities. Unlike offline assemblages, Gaia offers the possibility of lines of flight through experimenting with subject positions and getting closer to becoming *other*. Deleuze and Guattari's idea of 'becoming' opens up a space to question the concept of child as a static stage by breaking down the striating mechanisms that work to narrowly define children and youth.

This research project attempts to disrupt modernist, striating notions of young people as immature and less than adults. The Deleuzian philosophy of becoming, and ultimately this project, open up the possibility for questioning universalising truths about young people. There are numerous studies that view technology as either positive or negative. These binary focused studies tend to view the internet in very narrow ways by ignoring the fact that the internet, like every assemblage, is composed of a multitude of lines of flight, molecular lines, and molar lines. While this study acknowledges that molar striating mechanisms do operate in the virtual world, it also offers insight into the perspective that new media technologies have the

potential for providing new opportunities for lines of flight. Both of these perspectives can lead to greater understandings of the internet as a new and emerging space for possibility and as well as a space for social reproduction.

There are some limitations to this research project. As noted previously in the methodology section, Deleuze and Guattari's theories do not lend themselves well to research that requires organisation and structure (which is *most* research). However, there are ways to work with their ideas while still paying homage to a Deleuzian philosophy of 'dis'-order. Another limitation to this research project is that the theory used can be difficult to understand and thus this paper may not appeal to a diverse audience. Furthermore, Deleuzian philosophy can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. An example of this is evident in the discussion chapter where it is mentioned that my lack of acceptance as a researcher in the Gaian community is an example of both molar exclusion and molecular resistance. This dilemma of interpretation may be the result of varying ideas about what constitutes a line of flight. While doing this project, it quickly became evident that molar lines are easy to find and lines of flight are not as easily distinguishable. Finally, another limitation to this project is that the methodology was not ideal and, as a result, I was unable to acquire a sufficient sample of data. Initially I was frustrated about the lack of data that I was able to get. However, after completing this project in its entirety I have come to the conclusion that acquiring a large sample size was not necessary. The purpose of this project was to get a glimpse of the possible ways that Deleuze and Guattari's theories relate to Gaia online, it was not about proving anything or making any definitive truth claims and thus a large sample of data was not needed.

For future research a comparison of online and offline politically oriented groups would be fruitful to determine whether there are differences in terms of potential for lines of flight. As

argued in this paper, online groups may offer opportunities for lines of flight through the potential for anonymity. Offline groups, on the other hand, are not anonymous and yet (like every assemblage) they still contain lines of flight. More research could indicate which grouping (online or offline) offers more opportunities for disruption and perhaps distinguish what happens to such disruption. Further research could also be done to look at a variety of different social networking sites. Do some online groupings offer more potential for lines of flight than others? Gaia is a predominantly teen oriented site. Are there differences between adult and teen sites in terms of censorship and rules? Are adult sites less molarizing because there are not as many rules and regulations? Does less restriction lead to more lines of flight? These are a few suggestions for future research.

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Appendix A- Letter of Invitation

HELLO GAIA MEMBERS,

My name is Katie and I am a graduate student from Brock University in Ontario, Canada. I am currently working on a master's thesis and I would like to invite you to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is examine how young people use social forums and online social communities to identify and address issues of public concern, including electoral action (things people do concerning campaigns and elections), civic action (things people do to help in their communities and/or to contribute to social causes such as animal rights, human rights, etc.), and political voice (things people do to give expression to their political and social viewpoints).

WHAT'S INVOLVED

Below I have posted several questions that you can comment on. Commenting is an option and you are in no way obligated to do so at any point. You can also contact me individually through email at ke11iq@brocku.ca as an alternative to answering the questions in the group context. Please be advised that if you choose to answer any of the questions your responses may be used for research purposes. If you do not wish to participate in this research project then kindly refrain from responding to the questions.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The benefit of your participation in this research project is that you will have the opportunity to contribute your thoughts about political issues to a growing field of study that views young people as social actors who have considerable insight to offer as young people, rather than as *merely* future adults

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. A pseudonym will be used in place of your online name. Data collected during this study will be stored in a secure place that is only accessible by the researcher. Data will be kept for the duration of the study, approximately one year, after which time it will be destroyed and disposed of.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Katie at ke11iq@brocku.ca or Rebecca at rraby@brocku.ca. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University

QUESTIONS

Please be advised that you are not obligated to respond to all or any of the following questions. However, if you choose to make a comment please indicate in your response which question you are answering. Please respond to the questions by February 8th, 2013.

- 1) Do you think that Gaia is a space where people can speak about issues that they wouldn't necessarily be able to speak about in the offline world? If so, in what ways?
- 2) Do you think that the rules and regulations set out by Gaia influence what you write/talk about in this forum? If so, in what ways?
- 3) What are the types of political issues that you feel comfortable talking about in this forum? Are there any political issues that you feel uncomfortable talking about?
- 4) Do you consider this group a political activist group? Why or why not?
- 5) Are you as politically active in the offline world as you are in Gaia? If so, in what ways?
- 6) Do you think that Gaia and/or this forum is an effective way to voice your opinions on political matters and/or to bring about societal change? Why or why not?
- 7) Thank you for your assistance in this project.

Thank you for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely, Katie (Chloerxy)

